

THE
**NAMELESS
TRICKSTER**

REBECCA F. KENNEY

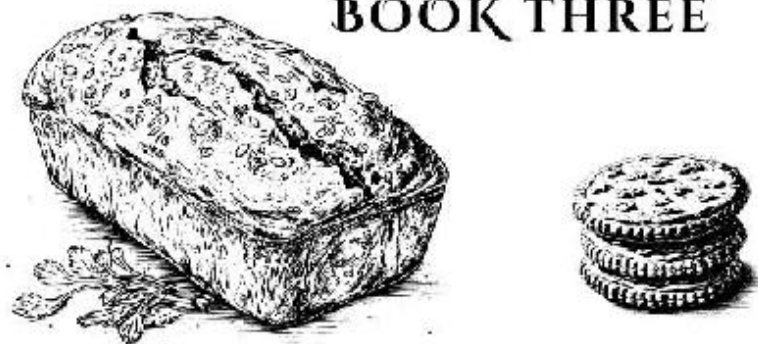
FOR THE LOVE OF THE VILLAIN

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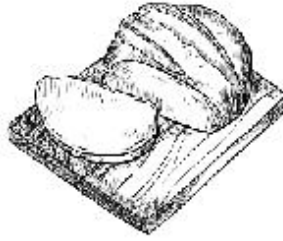


FOR THE LOVE OF THE VILLAIN

BOOK THREE



REBECCA F. KENNEY



PLAYLIST

“Labour” -Paris Paloma

“Flares” -The Script

“Crashed” -Daughtry

“Big Girls Don’t Cry” -Fergie

“Golden” -Harry Styles

“Yellow” -Coldplay

“Who Are You” -SVRCINA

“Fire N Gold” -Bea Miller

“Glow” -Gabrielle Current

“Gold” -MARINA

“Castle” -Halsey

READING GUIDANCE



Explicit sex between characters, addictive behavior, violence, brief mention of mutilation, dubious consent, sexual threat, blood, sex during menstruation

This book includes the mention of eunuchs—male-identifying castrated individuals serving in the house of the King’s concubines. There is historical precedent for this practice in many different cultures. Within this book, such procedures are never described on page in any detail, only mentioned in passing. Also, no mention of these fictional characters is intended as disrespect to those who, for various reasons, go through a similar type of procedure in real life. In the book, the procedure is forcibly imposed on unwilling people, and therefore carries a connotation of body horror. However, I recognize, as I hope my readers do, that such a procedure may bring peace or better health in certain real-life cases. Please read safely and with love for yourself and others.



PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Rupert: RU-pert

Juliette: Joo-lee-ET

Enthel: EHN-thul

Lannau: La-NOW

Bede: BEED

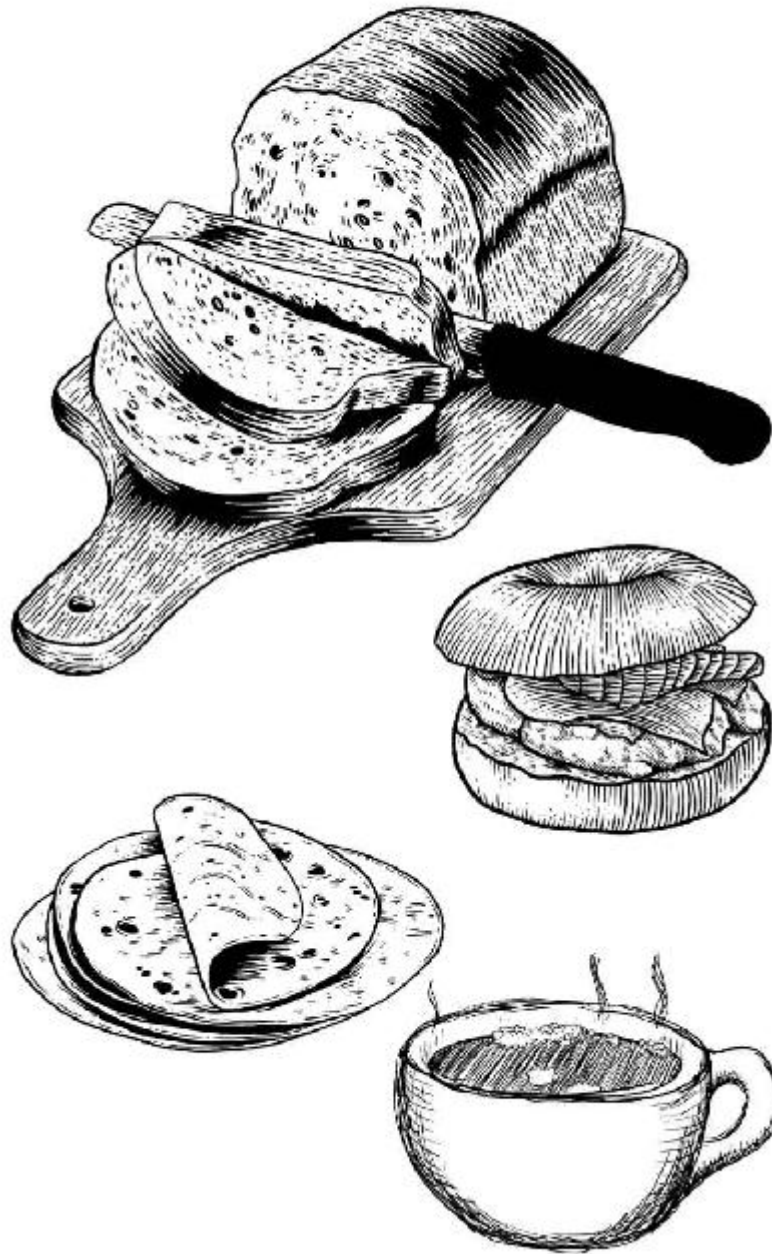
Falron: FAHL-run

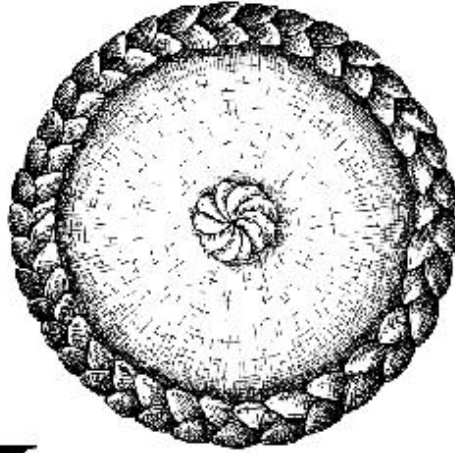
Darthage: DAR-thaj

Giltos: GILL-toss

Argelos: ARR-geh-loss

Eunuch: YOO-nick





JULIETTE

I shield my eyes against the brilliant sunshine, peering through the colorful hubbub of the market. I can't see my brother, and that worries me. Mistress Godward is taking far too long to inspect the loaves of bread I brought her, which means Prain has had several minutes to escape my sight, and that's more than enough time for him to find a whore or a gambling table or some other luxury we can't afford.

"They're perfect loaves, just like last time," I say brightly, trying not to let my impatience seep through my tone. "Six bits apiece."

"Five," she grunts.

"Six, like always, or I'll take them to Mistress Andworthy."

"Fine." The little woman snaps her fingers at her tall husband, who hurries forward to pay me, then retreats meekly to his spot at the back of the booth.

"Thanks." I walk away from the stall, tucking the coins into my pocket. I want to keep the incoming and outgoing funds separate: earnings in my pocket, and the money for today's purchases in the basket I'm carrying.

“Juliette!” A familiar voice shouts from a nearby booth.

“Good morning, Ambrew.” I smile at the freckled farmer’s son, who nearly trips over his feet in his haste to reach me.

“Juliette, I picked these just for you. The choicest blooms in my mother’s garden.” Ambrew smiles at me, flushed, bright-eyed, and earnest.

“So sweet of you.” I smile back while looking over his head, scanning the clusters of market-goers for Prain. “Forgive me, but I must find my brother. Here—take a muffin.” I reach into my basket for one of the apple-cinnamon treats. Bits of crumbly brown-sugar topping sift over my fingers as I hand it to Ambrew. “We’ll talk later, yes?”

“Oh yes!” He gives me a rapturous grin. He proposed two months ago, and my gentle refusal doesn’t seem to have dimmed his ardor at all. He’s hoping for another chance.

As I continue through the market, another man calls to me—the fishmonger, ten years Ambrew’s senior and just as keen on marrying me. While Ambrew appreciates my ample curves and my friendly nature, the fishmonger appreciates my business sense. Recently he told me about the pub he wants to open—a place to sell his fish and my bread. The two of us, running a thriving business. It was tempting... or it would have been if I were even slightly attracted to him. But he’s too... oily. His hair shines with pomade—looks as if a bright beam of sunlight might set it on fire.

Besides, I can’t accept any offers of marriage. I’m the miller’s daughter, the one who maintains Pa’s legacy. With his usual wisdom, Pa left the mill to me, not Prain, and I keep the place running. I pay the workers, I deal with the farmers who come to grind their corn and wheat, and I use flour from our own crops to create the delicious baked goods that are so popular with the eateries in our large town of Maystead.

I’m the one who turns the golden wheat from the field into the coin that keeps us fed and clothed, not to mention paying for repairs and labor. We should be well-off by now—not wealthy, perhaps, but comfortable—if it weren’t for my brother’s foolish, expensive indulgences. Indulgences he’s probably balls-deep in right now...

Where the *fuck* is he?

Our town is a well-known stop on the way from the border villages to the royal city of Giltos, and for many visitors it's a destination of its own. Maystead has a weekly market, good inns, jolly pubs, and well-kept streets, thanks to the Lady Mayor, who took over management of the place fifteen years ago, after her husband's death. But with the regular influx of visitors comes the demand for other establishments—dice halls, gambling houses, brothels, peep shows, and even a naughty marionette theater. Those lie on the west side of town, past the market. Before I venture there, I'm determined to search this area thoroughly.

The sun beats down on me as I hurry between the brightly-colored booths, waving to acquaintances, forcing myself to return merry greetings. I'm full-figured, my shape a testament to my excellent cooking, and between the sun, my anxiety, and my hurried pace, I'm starting to sweat. Finally I pause to rest, seating myself on the edge of the fountain in the town square. There's a breeze here, thank the goddess.

I set my basket at my feet, dip my fingers into the fountain, and pat my neck, arms, and cleavage with the cool water.

Why would Prain abandon me like this? He knows I have errands to run, that I need his help to carry supplies. He can't have much coin of his own, and the purse with the supply money is with me, in the... in the basket...

Oh no.

I grab the basket and fold back the cloth cover. Inside there's a square wooden dish with several muffins. Tucked beside the dish are my small notebook and a jar of cinnamon sticks I purchased. In the corner there should be a bag with the money for today's market excursion.

Except it's gone.

Prain knew I needed that coin for essentials. Yet he took the money anyway. All of it.

Fuck.

Tears gather in my eyes as I set the basket down again. I bend my head forward, letting my long brown hair fall around my face to conceal my expression, which probably reflects what I feel—betrayal, hurt, anger, frustration, desperation.

My brother takes everything. No matter how hard I work, we never get very far ahead—we still struggle, because he can't say no to himself. He can't resist the lure of risk and pleasure, the thrill of compulsion racing through his blood.

And in spite of it all, I love him. I just don't know how to help him.

I don't know what to do.

There's a sob swelling in my chest, more tears burning in my sinuses. The first tears overflow, trailing down my cheeks. I whisk them away quickly, but two more follow.

No. I'm not doing this here, among the tourists ambling past and the townspeople who know me. If they see me crying, they'll stop to ask questions I *really* don't want to answer.

I straighten my spine and sniff a few times, shaking back my hair. I'll allow myself a good cry later. Right now, I have to find Prain before he spends all the coin we brought.

But I need a few minutes to work up the courage to wander into the west side of town. Last time I ventured there looking for Prain, I endured a hundred lewd comments about my big breasts, my thick thighs, and my large ass. One of the brothel madams ran her fingers through my abundant hair, pinched my cheek, and said, "If you ever want to make a bit of easy money now and then, I could put you to work. Big beautiful girl like you, with those juicy thighs and huge tits, and your pretty eyes—you'd be able to charge top price."

"I don't judge anyone who chooses this life, but it's not the one I want," I told her.

"Fine." She sucked on her pipe and blew fragrant smoke into my face. "I thought you might want to start now, while you have a choice. But I can wait. You'll be on my doorstep one day, when that foolish brother of yours drives you to desperation."

I can still hear her mocking laugh. I shiver a little and focus on the cooing of the pigeons, perched above me on the stone arms of the King's statue. This fountain was added three years ago, shortly after King Falron inherited the throne at age fifty-two. Here he's depicted as a nude, toned young man, each extended arm holding a pitcher that pours lifegiving water into the stone mouths of the small kneeling figures clustered at his feet. That's us, the impoverished beings who squirm beneath him. Inevitably my gaze falls to the statue's massive, flaccid cock, which hangs nearly to his knee. Recently a set of odd scrawls and symbols showed up on that oversized appendage, and the Lady Mayor's lackeys had to chip the paint off to restore the statue's doubtful glory.

The Lady Mayor ordered the constable to investigate the incident. A few boys had been spotted near the statue that night, but when questioned, they swore their innocence and claimed the Elves did it. No one believed them, of course. The Elves retreated to their own havens long ago, and they don't come into our towns.

The boys only suffered a couple hours of discomfort in the stocks, as prescribed by the constable. If Maystead lay nearer to the royal city of Giltos, defilers of the King's statue wouldn't have gotten off so easily. I've heard the King can be ruthless to those who disrespect him.

The pigeons, though—they can shit on the King with impunity. There's one perched on his jutting hipbone right now, relieving itself with a white splatter onto the stone cock.

“You think it's really that big?” says a male voice.

I turn, peering up at the hooded figure beside me. How did I not notice his approach?

“Pardon?” I say.

“His cock. You think the King's cock is that enormous?”

“I wouldn't know. But I doubt any cock is that large, honestly.”

The man looks down at me. His face is too shadowed for me to make out his features, but his eyes are bright blue—

almost luminescent. “You’re a fair judge of cocks, are you?” There’s a smirk in his voice.

“Not really, no.” A blush is creeping up my neck, which frustrates me, because when I blush I go all splotchy from tits to forehead. “I think, for the purposes of the statue, its length is more symbolic than realistic.”

“Symbolic?” asks the stranger. “How so?”

“Well... symbolic of the King’s masculinity, I suppose. His dominance, his virility, his right to rule.”

“And how, pray tell, does virility make someone more fit to reign?”

“It doesn’t.” I push myself up, off the stone edge of the fountain. “As stimulating as this conversation is, I must go find my brother. I leave you to your contemplation of His Majesty’s penis.”

“But you haven’t heard my treatise on the size of his balls yet.”

“I’m sorry to miss it, but I really have to go.”

“Very well. But first, I must ask—can you spare anything for a poor traveler? My pocket’s been picked, and I’m terribly hungry. A few coins would help.”

“Coins?” A pang runs through me at the thought of Prain slipping his hand into my shopping basket, stealing the coin-purse while I laid out the loaves for Mistress Godward. The only coins I have are the ones she paid me, and I need those. “I don’t have any money to spare, but I can offer you this.” I crouch beside the basket, lay back the cloth, and survey the muffins inside. There are two with candied orange peel, another apple-cinnamon one, and a lemon-blueberry. The lemon-blueberry is my favorite—I’d planned to enjoy it later this afternoon.

I reach for a candied-orange muffin... and then I hesitate.

I have an inner sense sometimes, an instinct about the people I meet. I can guess what types of food or baked goods they’ll enjoy, just by looking at them and speaking to them for a short while.

I can't see much of this stranger except his heavy brown cloak and his oddly bright blue eyes. We've barely spoken. And yet I know, somehow, that the lemon-blueberry muffin is his favorite.

"Here." I pluck it from the dish and hand it to him. "For your hunger. I made it myself. I wish I could do more."

"Thank you." He holds it carefully. "Your kindness will be remembered."

"It's nothing." I shrug. "Go on, eat it. Tell me what you think."

He lifts the muffin toward his hooded face.

At that very moment, a sharp female voice hollers, "Juliette! Oh, Juliette!"

I turn toward the sound. "Mistress Caviston. How are you?"

Mistress Caviston bustles toward me, accompanied by her two daughters, Elbina and Fray, both of whom are nearly my age—just a few years short of thirty. I think they're both attractive, but the eligible men of the region seem to disagree. Elbina and Fray have made several envious comments to me about the offers of marriage I've refused, hinting that maybe I could direct some of my suitors their way. And I've tried. But the men of this region like a woman with a richer kind of beauty, one who looks like she either cooks well or can afford to eat well. So far they haven't taken my unsubtle hints about the many good qualities of the Caviston girls.

"Did you hear the news?" squeaks their mother. "The king has decreed that he's going to marry a sorceress! The announcement went out this morning—it's posted absolutely everywhere, and Master Hobbs said he saw royal guards riding in through the north gate half an hour ago!"

"The king says he doesn't care about noble birth," exclaims Fray. "He wants the hand of the most powerful sorceress in all of Darthage."

"That would be Lady Kessalif, wouldn't it?" I ask. "She's about his age, and she possesses the most powerful magic

Darthage has seen in two hundred years.”

“But she can’t have children,” Mistress Caviston replies. “He wants someone younger, someone fertile. They’re collecting the candidates now, from every city and town—all the unmarried, magically gifted women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five!”

“What do you mean *collecting* them?” I frown.

“Oh, well...” Her expression changes a little. “The guards are sort of... shoving them into carriages. They don’t get to pack anything, but of course they’ll have everything they need when they get to the palace. And their families receive a bag of gold from the Crown. Isn’t it wonderful? I’d give anything to have magic!”

“Surely the women get a choice, though,” I persist. “Or is the king *buying* these women from their families?”

“I’m not sure they have much choice,” Mistress Caviston admits. “Why do you look so worried, dear? Have you been hiding some magical gift from us?”

Before I can respond, a familiar voice rings out across the square. “There she is!”

I exhale with relief. Prain, at last. Maybe he hasn’t spent all the money yet. Maybe he thought better of what he did and came back to...

But my hope fades as I spot him on the street corner across the square. My handsome, shiftless brother is surrounded by four royal guards. A handful of ruffians are lurking nearby as well, and their gazes follow Prain’s pointing finger toward me.

I recognize those lurkers as debt enforcers for Dom Echelin, the owner of the biggest dice house in town. They’ve stopped by the mill before. Last time, I had enough money to pay them, and they left peacefully. That was two months ago, and Prain swore it would never happen again. He vowed it to me after they left—sobbed at my feet, with his head in my lap. “Never again, Jules,” he choked out. “I’ll never do it again.”

And I, like a fool, believed him. Pa used to say it’s my greatest fault—believing the best of everyone. Trusting their

words when their actions speak differently.

And now Prain shows up with royal guards *and* debt enforcers? What has he gotten himself into this time?

Leaving my basket by the fountain, I walk toward my brother. The market-goers make way for me as I cross the square. They're curious about the ruckus, the shouting, the presence of the soldiers and ruffians. They want a show. They don't care that my stomach is knotting, that my mind is racing, that I'm frantically trying to size up the situation and determine how to get my brother out of whatever trouble he's landed in this time.

Prain has a black eye and a bloody lip. He wears a strained smile as I approach.

"There she is, like I told you," he announces loudly. "My sister, the most gifted sorceress in this town."

Gasps sift through the people in the square. Everyone's gazes swerve to me; I can feel the pressure of their questioning eyes.

"And what is her gift?" asks one of the royal guards.

"Changing one thing into another," says Prain, with a theatrical flourish of his hands. "Wheat, straight from the field, transforms into the most delicious breads and cakes, without a recipe or an oven! Bits of grass transform into new shingles for the roof of the mill or the barn! How else do you think she keeps our buildings in such good repair? You've all tasted her baked goods—can you doubt the magic in their delectable flavor? Why, she can spin straw into gold!"

One of the guards pulls out a leather-bound notebook. "We don't have a woman with those powers on the registry for this town, and no one has reported a sorceress with any such gift."

Prain steps away from the guards, spreading his arms as he speaks to the gathering crowd. "Modest, humble creature that she is, Juliette has kept this a secret from all of you. But I will not keep silent when her gift could finally win my sweet sister the life she deserves."

The guard with the notebook has fancy epaulets—I think he’s a captain. He nods and gestures to two of the other men. “We don’t have time to test her here—we’re already behind schedule. Put her in the wagon with the others, and give this man his gold.”

A page comes forward and hands my brother a leather bag. Immediately Dom Echelin’s enforcers surge out of the shadows and surround Prain, clearly intending to collect whatever he owes them. One of them grips his shoulder roughly, and Prain winces.

The pieces of the puzzle slide together in my mind. Prain owes a debt—one that might have cost him his life if he hadn’t thought of this scheme. He’s selling me to the King so he can pay his debts to Dom Echelin.

It’s absurd. It will never work. The moment the guards tell me to do magic, and I can’t, they’ll know I’m a fraud.

But if I confess to the lie right now, the royal guards will beat Prain and take back the bride-price. After that, Dom Echelin’s men will probably thrash Prain to death and then come after me to settle his debt—which must be a huge one. If it was a manageable sum, Prain would have asked me for the money.

It’s too late to back out now. The guards are upon me already.

Gloved hands close on my arms, and I’m escorted through the crowd toward a tall wagon I didn’t notice before. There’s a chain across the door, and its exterior is covered in symbols. I’m not well-versed in magical lore, but I think the symbols are wards, probably intended to keep the passengers from using their abilities to escape.

One of the guards shoves his palm against my spine, urging me forward.

I could speak up now. I *should* speak up.

But if I do, Prain could die.

I have to believe he wouldn’t do this unless he was desperate, unless there was absolutely no other way he could save himself.

If I go along with the royal guards, at least Prain will have some time before the lie is discovered. Maybe he can run—get out of this town, flee somewhere else. I have a little money stowed away that he doesn't know about—he can use that to start over somewhere new.

I wrench against the firm hands of the guards. “At least let me say goodbye to my brother.”

They glance at the captain, and he nods. “One minute,” he says warningly.

When I beckon to Prain, he approaches me warily, with a forced smile. His hands are empty—Dom Echelin's men already took the bag of gold, the price of my freedom.

Wrapping my arms around my brother, I whisper in his ear. “The leftmost stone of the hearth. Pry it up and you'll find enough to get you away from this town. When they discover I don't have magic, they'll come for you. You have to run.”

“You hid money from me?” he hisses.

“I had to.”

“Jules.” He squeezes me tighter. “I'm so sorry about this. Things got out of hand—”

“I'll figure it out. Just take care of yourself and for gods' sake, don't gamble anymore!”

They're empty words. I know it even as I speak them. This compulsion is too strong for him to defeat it alone. He needs more guidance than I was ever able to give him.

“Find someone to help you,” I tell him, as the guards pull me away. “Please.”

Prain is smiling, tears in his eyes. “My heart goes with you, Jules.”

The guards hustle me into the wagon. Once inside I spin around, scanning the crowd, desperate for one last sight of my brother.

But he's already gone.

Stricken, I sink onto one of the benches as the guards slam the door and draw the chain across it.

The windows of the wagon have been sealed over with a sort of mesh that permits light but prevents a clear view. Along the walls at intervals, there are metal loops where chains might be attached. No chains are visible, but the message is clear—this wagon was built for prisoners.

Four women are in the wagon with me. Three of them sit silent in the gloom as we rattle through the streets. One is scrunched in the corner on the floor, between the bench and the wall. She's sobbing quietly.

After several minutes, a woman with ebony skin and long braids clears her throat and shifts on the bench. She looks at me with wide, clear eyes, dark and soft. Her voice is low, cautiously friendly. "I'm Shenya. I can sweeten any drink with a touch, no sugar required."

"I'm Juliette," I say. "I, um... I'd rather not share my gift."

"Smart," says a sharp-faced woman with freckled skin. "We'll be rivals at the palace. Best not to give each other too much information."

The girl in the corner sobs louder.

The fourth woman sighs, crosses her legs. I can't help admiring her sleek features, angled eyes, and flawless bronze skin. She's easily the loveliest among us, and her scarlet irises and lavender hair make her even more striking. She also wears countless pieces of jewelry, whereas I possess only two: my mother's gold necklace and my father's wedding ring. Prain used to wear our mother's wedding ring on his little finger until it disappeared one day. He claimed he'd lost it, but I suspect he pawned it or gambled it away.

"You're all acting like this is a punishment, or a death sentence," says the bejeweled woman, her tone sharp. "I'm from a noble family. I actually have something to lose. But as for the rest of you, this is the best chance you'll get to make something of your pathetic lives."

"Nobility doesn't make you more valuable than the rest of us, Lady Nerith," Shenya retorts.

Lady Nerith? So the bejeweled girl is the daughter of the Lord who governs our region. I haven't seen her in person

before now, but I met her father briefly once, when I delivered baked goods to the Lady Mayor's house on a feast day. He seems kind enough, and he grants a good deal of autonomy to the mayors of all the towns and villages under his care. Apparently his daughter has rather an inflated sense of her own importance, though.

“What could you have to lose, anyway?” Shenya continues. “As the daughter of a noble house, becoming queen would still be a step up for you. You'd sit on the throne of this land and rule beside the King, enjoying even greater wealth and power than you already have.”

“Unless he doesn't choose me,” Nerith says. “He can only choose one.”

“And the others will return home,” I add comfortingly, for the benefit of the weeping girl.

To my surprise, the other women don't corroborate my statement. Instead, they exchange knowing glances.

“What?” I look at each of them in turn.

“We've already asked the guards about that,” Shenya says quietly. “They told us the women who aren't chosen as Queen will remain at the palace permanently, as royal concubines.”

Well... fuck me.



THE TRICKSTER

She left her basket behind when they took her.

No one else seems to notice it, so I pick it up, hoping for more food. Never in my life have I tasted anything so delicious as that woman's muffin.

Now *there's* some fodder for a dirty joke. A missed opportunity—I should have quipped something about her “tasty muffin” earlier, when she and I were talking by the fountain.

They called her “Juliette.” There's something musical in the name, and I've always liked music. Music, food, and sex—my three favorite things. Music in her name, food in her hands, sex in every voluptuous curve of that lush body.

Pity they took her away before I had a chance to enjoy her.

With the basket in hand, I move through the crowd, keeping to the shadows of the tenement houses. I'm taking the same route as the royal guards and their wagon, simply because it's the fastest way out of the city. I've lingered here long enough. It's time to move on. Time to go back to the woods, where I'll wander alone, amusing myself at the expense of the few travelers who dare to pass through the Riddenwold—the

thick, ancient forest that cloaks the western border of this kingdom.

When I grow tired of wandering the woods, I venture into this town or that, amusing myself with simple mischief... like drawing pox curses on the King's statue, for instance. I'll usually steal a chicken or a pie, and maybe fuck a buxom wench in some dark alley. My visits never last long, though.

I like Maystead more than other towns I've visited, but I'm not such a fool as to believe I could ever live here. I belong nowhere. Not with the Elves of the Riddenwold, and not with humans. I carry the blood of both, and neither will ever truly accept me.

This is a better life, anyway... a life of liberty to do what I like, whenever I like. I'm not tethered to the Sanctuary where my Elvish kin live, in the great ravine at the heart of the forest—nor am I bound to a grubby farm, nor any bustling city full of smoke and sewage and rattling wheels. I drift between worlds, son of neither and a burglar of both.

Today I choose to leave the humans behind and withdraw into the woods again. I can see the faraway line of trees through the open town gates—a shady haven from the late-summer heat.

The mounted guards and the wagon roll out of Maystead's main gate, while I saunter out through the narrow footpath gate, munching another muffin. It's so delicious I can't help groaning a little.

The woman is an excellent cook. An artist, in fact. The layers of flavor baked into this single treat are incredible. The fluffy cake-like texture, the delicate sugared crust on top, the way I get occasional bursts of fruit—it's magnificent.

Yet she's being hauled off to play whore to a King who will never realize her true talent. I've heard enough of his latest decree to understand that he's only interested in magic and pussy. I'll wager her pussy is as plump and desirable as the rest of her, but as for the magic... I didn't sense any such thing from her. When I'm in the presence of a human with a touch of the Kin, the Mother's Kiss, my skin tightens a little, the hair on my arms lifts, and the back of my neck crawls with awareness.

I felt none of that with this girl.

I smelled her before I saw her—smelled her tears. Elvish noses are sensitive to the tears and arousal of humans. The fragrance of her sadness lured my attention, and her beauty kept me interested.

Those tears smelled like the deep blush of maroon roses, infused with the honey of love and the black spice of betrayal. I approached her, thirsting for that emotion, wanting to lick her round, rosy cheeks. But instead I stood beside her, joked with her, and asked her for food. I didn't really expect her to give me any. But she's as generous as she is talented.

I step off the road and walk under the eaves of the forest, in their cool shadow. Instead of veering deeper into the forest, I'm lingering in the open, my eyes on the royal guards and the wagon full of women.

I frown deeply, my mouth full of muffin.

Why am I still thinking about the woman—about Juliette?

Maybe it's the fact that her brother practically sold her right under the noses of the entire town, and no one protested—not a word.

Maybe it's the look I saw on her face—disappointment, love, resignation, courage...

She yielded without a fight. She could have protested, could have saved herself... but for the love of her brother, she didn't.

The wagon and the riders picked up their pace once they left the town walls, and since I've maintained a casual saunter, they're far ahead, approaching a bend in the road.

Juliette will be gone in another moment.

Once the wagon rounds that corner, she'll leave my mind as well as my sight, and I'll continue with my day.

A day that seems suddenly hollow and dull... less important and interesting than she is.

What will they do to her when they find out she has no magic? Send her home, keep her, or kill her? From what I've

heard of the King's carnal appetites, I suspect he'll keep her as a concubine.

A flicker of fiery resentment lashes through my heart at the thought. He'll get to taste her before I do.

Why should I care how she tastes, or who enjoys her?

I shove the last bit of muffin into my mouth as the wagon disappears around the hill.

She's gone, so there's an end to it. Whatever happens to her is none of my business.

I turn toward the forest's emerald gloom...

And then I turn just as resolutely in the opposite direction and run after the wagon.

I may be a Half-Elf, but I could match any of my full-blooded Kin in a foot-race. I can keep pace with the riders easily.

I'll follow Juliette to the royal city of Giltos, get myself a disguise, and slip right into the House of Bounty where the concubines live. Not because I *care* about Juliette, but because I want to claim her body before the King does. Once I've done that, I'll be able to wash my hands of her and return to my life.



JULIETTE

My brain can't seem to move past Shenya's statement. I'm stuck in a paralyzed kind of shock, trying to understand what it means—how drastically my life has changed in such a short time.

The girls who aren't chosen as queen won't be going home. They'll be concubines—not even secondary wives, but a stable of sorts, a collection from which the King can select the face and body type he's in the mood for.

The lie Prain told is far more dangerous than I realized. I need to tell someone the truth about my lack of magic as soon as possible. I have to get out of this wagon. I want to go home.

“How can we speak to one of the guards?” I ask, in a voice much calmer than I feel. “Will they answer if we call out?”

“No,” Shenya says. “One of us already tried that.” She glances significantly at the weeping girl. “But you can try speaking with one of them the next time they open the door.”

Heart thumping, fingers clutching the edge of the wooden bench, I wait for the wagon to halt and the door to open.

I wait.

And I wait.

Onward we roll and rattle, jostled against each other occasionally like a few apples bumping around in a bucket.

More time passes, and the girl in the corner finally stops crying.

Maybe I should call out after all. But I can't bring myself to yell for the guards. I'm on the verge of it several times, but the words won't come. If we're too close to home when I confess, the guards could still go after Prain. Their anger at being deceived might outweigh their desire to stick to their schedule.

The strain of waiting gnaws at my nerves so badly that I'd welcome the distraction of a conversation; but none of the other women speak, and I can't think of the right words to break the silence.

After what feels like years, the ground beneath the wagon wheels changes, turns hollow. We're crossing Becker's Bridge, a three-hour carriage ride from the mill.

I should speak now. Cry out, make a fuss, get them to stop, then tell the truth.

Would they even believe me? Or would they think I'm just trying to get out of doing my duty to the King?

In our kingdom of Darthage, the word of the male in a household usually carries more weight than a woman's. Unfair, but true. The guards are more likely to rely on my brother's word than mine.

But I have to try *something*. I can't just sit here and travel farther and farther away from my home without protest.

I'm working up the courage to shatter the creaking quiet of the wagon with a shout, when suddenly, mercifully, it stops.

The chain clanks, and the door opens.

"Piss break," says a guard. He's holding a crossbow, lightly, angled downward, but it's still a warning. "Watch yourselves, ladies. No trouble, or we'll have to get rough."

I do need to piss, so I climb out of the wagon with the others and head for some bushes. In their shadow I crouch, taking care not to soil my shoes, stockings, or skirts. It's mid-afternoon, but the thick canopy of the trees and the lush undergrowth creates shadowed pockets within the wood, and I briefly contemplate fleeing, seeking refuge in those green depths.

"Hurry up!" shouts a guard. "No lingering, and no running, or you'll get a crossbow bolt to the knee!"

It's like he knew what I was thinking. Grimly I suppress the urge to flee and I head back toward the wagon, venturing closer to the guard with the crossbow. "I'm afraid there's been a mistake," I tell him in a low tone. "My brother—he likes to make up stories. I don't have magic."

He stares me down. "So your brother's a filthy liar."

"He wasn't thinking straight, sir. He—"

"Or *you're* the liar, trying to weasel your way out of serving your King."

"No, sir. That's not it."

"If your brother has lied to the Crown it'll be the gallows for him. As for you..." He cocks his head, surveying my body with a lustful gleam in his eye. "Either the gallows or the concubines' house, depending on the king's mood when we tell him how he's been deceived. So you'd better hope you have magic, and the showy kind, too."

Shit. This is worse than I imagined.

I've heard stories of the royal guards' cruelty, and the harshness of the king himself. But I live near a pleasant town, and until today I've had no encounters with the royal guards, so I thought it couldn't be that bad. Once again, it appears I was giving the benefit of the doubt to people who don't deserve it, like I did over and over with Prain.

All too soon, we're back in the wagon. The uneasy silence thickens the air again as the hours pass. We stop twice, and a couple more young women climb into the wagon. One claims

she can grow tiny flowers from her palms. Another can bend slender rays of light to create small reflections or faint illusions.

Magic has all but died out in this land, at least among humans. What's left lives mostly in a some of the women, and rarely in those of other genders. It manifests in small talents, simple gifts—with rare exceptions like Lady Kessalif, who possesses not only limited intrinsic gifts, but the ability to cast spells and curses like the Elves do.

Now that I've had time to think about King Falron's edict and the fact that he's keeping all the women he collects as concubines, his purpose is clearer to me. He wants a collection of women with magic, no matter how small their gifts may be, by which he can spawn a brood of children, a few of whom will hopefully be powerful—perhaps as powerful as Lady Kessalif herself.

We have lore about the source of magic. Our Creator Goddess gave it to the Early Ones, also called the Kin, the Chosen, or the Elves. They used it to tend the woods, tame the seas, and improve the world.

Though she preferred the Kin, the goddess did not exclude humans from magic entirely. Humans with a deep love of the soil, the sea, or the forests could absorb a bit of magic from nature, or from things the Elves had blessed. Such magic, once gained, belonged to those humans for life, and was often passed to their children, though it took a new and different form in each generation. Absorbing magical power used to be easier in ancient times, but now the world is more civilized, more well-traveled, and the Elves have withdrawn into their own haunts within the deep forest. The use of all Elvenmade objects, artifacts, and charmed objects is forbidden in Darthage, and has been for years. If the Elves did emerge and visit our towns, most people would fear them, not welcome them.

I've never had much of an opinion on the subject of Elvish-human relations. But I love stories with Elves in them, I bake Kinsbread at Elventide, and I enjoy a good kerrydin jig like anyone else in my town. I'd like to think I would be a friend to them if they decided to emerge again.

As the journey drags on, I wish fervently that I knew more about Elvish artifacts, or that I could locate some source of magic and absorb it. I don't fancy being killed or living out my life as a concubine. My mind and my will are still resisting the dreadful truth weighing on my heart—the truth that whether I have magic or not, whether I confess or not, my life as I knew it is over.

My business, my baking, my plans, my hopes—gone. Wiped out by my brother's choices—and by my choice to go along with his lie.

I don't want a title, a crown, or a royal husband. I want to get out of this wagon and go home. There's so much to do at the mill, so many standing orders to fill for the shops and inns in our area. Even if I escape this somehow, I've lost hours of work. I'm going to be so far behind.

You won't escape, a doleful voice in my mind tells me. *You'd best start thinking about how you can please the King.*

The King is well over fifty, but even his most recent statues and paintings depict him as young and virile. For someone like me, who has never seen him in person, it's hard to know for sure what he looks like. Official portraits or statues of government officials and nobles tend to be unrealistically flattering, while the caricatures sketched by political jokesters are just as unreliable, exaggerating the subject's worst features.

I don't know much more about King's style of rule than his personal appearance. Since he took power, he has been slowly tightening the laws that grew lax during his father's reign. He has formed alliances with the neighboring nations through bribery or threats—I'm not sure which. Our mill has suffered from hefty tax increases, so I've harbored a vague disapproval of his reign for a while, solely for that reason.

As for his personal life, I've heard the names of a few royal mistresses circulated through the market, but none of those mistresses seem to have lasted long. Certainly none gained a title or a crown. Perhaps now that the major affairs of the kingdom are more or less settled, the king has turned his attention to domestic affairs, and the duty of producing heirs.

My thoughts dissipate as the wagon halts again and a guard hands in a basket of sandwiches. I let the other women choose first, and by the time the basket gets to me, there's only one thin sandwich left... squashed brown bread, with sliced cucumber and shredded carrot embedded in a thick nutty paste. Not the sort of fare for a girl with a hearty appetite. The other women mutter complaints, protesting that they should be treated better as the King's prospective brides.

"I imagine things will improve once we reach the palace," says Shenya hopefully.

But I'm not so sure. So far it seems that the king doesn't consider us to be cherished potential brides. At best, we're possessions to collect, objects to evaluate. At worst, we're holes to enjoy and wombs to fill.

The next time the wagon stops, it's dark. Moths whir near the guards' lanterns. They let us piss again and give us each a thin blanket and a pillow. The captain declares, "We'll be traveling through the night. Tomorrow you will be fed, refreshed, and prepared for your service to the king."

He offers no other information, despite the clamor of questions that rises from the women. The wagon door slams shut.

Tucked in a corner, leaning against the wall, I doze off. When I rouse a few hours later, Shenya is slumped against my shoulder, snoring.

My stomach gurgles, protesting the lack of food. To lull myself to sleep, I mentally concoct a recipe inspired by the fat pumpkins currently ripening in my garden by the mill.

First, one of my secret spice blends: ginger, nutmeg, cloves, cinnamon, black pepper, all finely ground. A couple of eggs, a hint of vanilla, a sprinkle of salt and a half cup of buttermilk. Two cups of flour, two cups of sugar. Plenty of butter. Baker's ammonia for leavening. Pumpkin puree. Maybe a swirl of the maple syrup the Parbridge family produces from their groves. And then... oh then, the creamiest of frosting, layered over the cake once it cools.

I can almost taste it. Delicious, moist, thick, pumpkin cake, with frosting so smooth it's divine.

My fingers itch to be in my kitchen, with my earthenware mixing bowls and my copper pans and my well-used wooden spoons.

And now I feel even more homesick.



The wagon jolts to a stop, and I wake with a start.

“What’s going on?” slurs Shenya, sitting up and rubbing bleary eyes.

I tilt my head and crack my neck, which is stiff from being propped against the wall. “Are we at the palace?”

The rattle of the chain being removed wakes the other women. It’s almost laughable to me that the guards locked us in here, when none of us have anything resembling aggressive or combative magic. But I suppose a woman with intelligence is equally dangerous.

The door wrenches open, and a watery dawn light leaks into the stuffy space. Only when the fresh breeze hits my face do I realize how thick the air has gotten in the wagon—how much it smells of bodies and breath. I surge forward, eager for freedom.

“One at a time, ladies,” calls a tall, slim man with white hair. His thin wrinkled skin stretches over the fine bones of a face that’s still handsome despite his advanced age. He’s dressed in gold tights and a flamboyant crimson-and-teal doublet with puffed sleeves. A large gold brooch with a giant amethyst is pinned to his shoulder. Pursing his lips, he steeples his fingertips and surveys us as we tumble out of the wagon into the early morning light.

Despite the freshness of the air, there's no freedom to be had in this place. We're in a courtyard surrounded by walls, and I spot at least eight guards in addition to the ones who escorted us here. At one side of the courtyard a house rises—four stories of stone, adorned with the sculpted art—nude people coupling, flowers blooming, and cornucopias overflowing with berries, gourds, and fruits.

“Welcome to the House of Bounty, historic home of the royal wives, mistresses, and concubines,” says the white-haired gentleman. “I am Venedict Luron, Steward of the House. I'll be taking care of you from now on. I'm sure we'll all be very good friends.” His cheeks crease as his smile widens, showing all his narrow teeth. “As you may know, the king hasn't taken the time to fill the House since it was emptied after the death of his illustrious father. You ladies have the privilege of being permanent residents here, and one of you—” he waggles his eyebrows— “shall have the peerless delight of becoming the Queen of the land! Isn't that exciting?” He clasps both hands over his heart. “In the past, all but the most favored royal concubines would share rooms within the House, but the King has requested that each of you be given your own private quarters.”

Most of the women in our group perk up at that. I'm relieved, because if I'm not sharing a room, there's less chance of people pestering me to show off my supposed gift.

The captain who escorted us clears his throat. “You and your men have this well in hand, eh?”

“Oh, of course!” exclaims Venedict. “You've had a long journey. Go and eat something, and—” He sniffs delicately. “Have a bath as well, while you're at it.”

“Here's the list of their names, towns, and abilities.” The Captain hands over a notebook, then gestures sharply to his men. They troop after him, leaving the courtyard by a side archway.

Stable-hands come forward to take the horses and the wagon, while Venedict continues his speech.

“A few rules,” he says. “Each room has its own privy and running water, but no bathtub or parlor. Rooms with parlors and

tubs are reserved for the most favored concubines. You will bathe, dine, and enjoy leisure activities with the other women, but only during prescribed times. Otherwise you are to remain in your room. You are not to speak to, touch, or look at any male from this point onward, unless they wear the livery of the House of Bounty.” He points to a couple of men in leather vests, yellow shirts, and dark pants. “The yellow shirts mark them as eunuchs in the service of the house.”

“Eunuchs?” whispers Shenya.

The girl with the lavender hair and red eyes smirks and whispers back, “Men who have been castrated. Their balls are removed and their dicks shortened so they cannot soil the King’s concubines.”

Horror flashes through me. The idea is barbaric... and also seems a bit foolish. After all, male guards or servants could still pleasure a woman with their tongues or fingers. But I suppose after enduring that procedure, sexual activity of any kind would be far less appealing. And castration eliminates the risk of any illegitimate pregnancies among the King’s women.

Venedict is still speaking, and I focus on him again, fearing that I’ve missed one or two important rules.

“Once you’ve bedded the King and performed all the magical tasks he sets for you, you’ll be given full status as a royal concubine,” he says. “After that, you’ll be allowed to come and go as you please within the confines of the House, its courtyard, and its garden. You are not to venture into the palace itself unless you have written permission from myself or Lady Reese, the house matron. You may not attempt to contact the King in any way. If he wants you, he’ll send for you.”

Several elements of that speech deepen my sense of horror. We’re expected to sleep with the King? I assumed he’d want to test our magic... apparently he wants to test our bodies as well.

Full status as a royal concubine.

I don’t want that. I can’t do this. I need to escape, need to *run*...

“When you were invited to come here, you passed a brief test of your talents, yes?” asks Venedict.

I wouldn't describe this obligatory roundup of eligible brides as an "invitation." But the women around me are nodding, so I nod as well—even though I wasn't tested, I was simply hustled into the wagon and carted off.

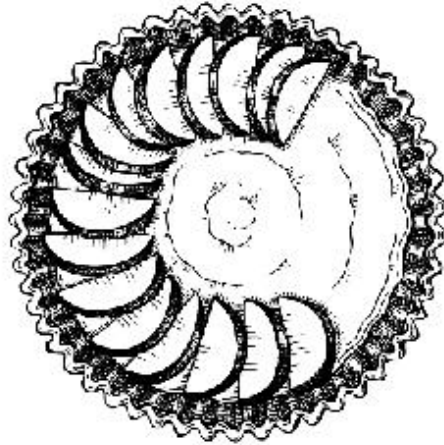
"Excellent, excellent." Venedict claps his hands. "We'll show you to the bath, and then to your chambers. You'll have breakfast in your rooms this morning, and beauty treatments this afternoon. Over the next several weeks you'll complete various tests of your magic, so we can begin to gauge which among you is the most powerful. And starting tonight, the King will be summoning one of you each evening for a night of pleasure you won't soon forget!" His smile broadens, tightening his cheeks and deepening the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. "Come along, everyone! Several ladies from Coppton, Morburg, and Donelow are already inside, and more will be arriving today and tomorrow, from other towns. What a merry crowd we will be!"

We follow him toward the great pillared entrance of the House of Bounty. Some of the women seem encouraged by the idea of private rooms, baths, and beauty treatments. I'm primarily interested in breakfast, and I'm also craving time on my own, a little silence and solitude so I can come to terms with my situation.

If I confess my lack of magic, I'll be taken to the King for judgment, which means I'll be sentenced to death or sent back to the House to await my turn in the King's bed. And I'll lose all chance at gaining favor with His Majesty or anyone else.

If I *don't* speak up, my status as a concubine won't change... but at least I won't draw the King's anger upon myself right away. I doubt I'll be the first person whose magic they test, which means I'll have time, maybe even a few days, during which I can try to find a way out of this mess.

For now, I need to keep my mouth shut and my head down, and avoid drawing attention to myself.



THE TRICKSTER

There's an old Elvish practice, frowned upon in these enlightened times... but it serves me well when I want to go somewhere I'm not supposed to be.

First, find a person who can get into the place you need to go, ideally a servant or a guard, someone with nondescript clothing or a uniform. In my case, that person is Rupert Diggs, a servant for the House of Bounty. He's about my height, and we have a similar build—tall, broad, thick with muscle. The livery should fit well enough.

Second, waylay that person in some isolated place. In this case, my friend Rupert is out making some purchases from a grocer's shop near the palace—a fancy, overpriced sort of place where the goods come wrapped in thick, shiny paper and stamped with the grocer's seal. I reach out from the alley and yank him into the shadows, clamping one hand quickly over his mouth so he can't scream.

Third... the unfortunate part. I have to take a bit of his flesh for the spell. I choose the tip of the smallest toe on his left foot. He shouldn't mind, really. It's not as if he needs it. I place him under a brief immobilization curse while I remove his boot

and slice off the bit of toe, which I seal into a tiny jar and set aside for the moment. A little healing salve halts the bleeding, and I bandage him up nicely. Really, he should be grateful.

Next comes another unfortunate part, in which I must strip the poor bastard naked and tuck him into a wooden box, overlaid with a stasis charm. The charm will last until I remove it, keeping him dormant yet alive, and concealing both the box and his body from view at the end of the alley.

“I’ll be back for you tomorrow,” I assure him as I close the box. He can’t hear me, of course—he’s already deep in the most restful sleep of his life, poor bastard. I’m doing him a favor, taking over his job and giving him this time off. The stasis charm could potentially last for weeks, but I shouldn’t need more than a night and a day at most.

I remove the lid of the jar and complete the spell, adding a blob of my spit and a few grains of embersalt. While resealing the jar, I speak an Elvish limerick about mistaken identity, and there we have it. Charm complete.

Anyone who knew Rupert Diggs will be convinced I’m him when they encounter me, as the spell adjusts their perception of my face and voice to match their memory of him. Anyone who *hasn’t* met Rupert will perceive me exactly as I am—brown hair, a winning smile, ruggedly handsome features—but they won’t notice the unnatural glow of my blue eyes or the sharp tips of my ears, unless I allow it.

Elves lack the body hair humans possess, and they cannot tattoo their flesh—but as a man of both human and Elvish descent, I have facial hair and body hair, as well as several tattoos. Those human traits have served me well in the past when someone began to question my ancestry. Unfortunately, my blended heritage also means I heal more slowly than most of the Kin, though still quicker than humans—and my reserves of magical energy aren’t quite as deep.

As I suspected, Rupert Diggs’ livery is a good fit, comprised of a bright yellow tunic, a leather vest, and dark pants. Male servants and guards of the concubines’ House all wear yellow, marking them as eunuchs—castrated so they don’t

dip their dicks into the royal whores. It's a good disguise—one that conceals my true lascivious purpose.

I tuck the tiny flesh-charm jar into an inner pocket of the vest. I'll need to keep it on me or near me at all times, lest the charm break. Into the same pocket I slide the small, palm-sized notebook I found in Juliette's basket. I haven't had a chance to read it yet. My first priority is getting inside the House of Bounty, then finding out where Juliette is, and then fucking her soundly. Once she's drenched in my scent, full of my cum, I'll be able to let this go. I'll be able to walk out of this city and never think of her again.

Or... maybe I'll get her to bake me another batch of muffins before I leave. To do that, she'll need access to a kitchen, which might be difficult to achieve if her movements are restricted. I'm not even sure where the kitchens are located in that immense House; but the flesh charm I've forged has another advantage—one I've promised myself I won't use except when absolutely necessary. If I need to, I can tap into Rupert's mind and access pieces of information, like the layout of the House or essential protocol for the guards and servants. But the more often I access Rupert's mind, the thinner the veil of his sleep will grow, which means he could regain consciousness and escape from the box. I'll have to be cautious.

Even if all my spellwork fails, I still have Elvish magic at my disposal to get me out of trouble. But like any other kind of work, magic requires energy, so I prefer to save my most powerful magic for moments when I desperately need it.

My stomach growls loudly as I finish fastening my borrowed vest. I've spent a lot of magical energy in the past hour, and since I'm half-human, that energy loss shows itself in a savage, gnawing hunger. The more magic I do, the greater the effect on my body, with hunger transforming weakness, fever, sweating, and an exhaustion that resembles a drunken stupor.

Lucky for me, my friend Rupert's groceries lie scattered over the cobblestones, including his coin-purse. I pick up the packages and the purse, tuck them back into the tote he was carrying, and saunter out of the alley, whistling.

I've been in the royal city of Giltos all day, ever since I trailed the brides' wagon to a side gate of the palace compound. By lurking and loitering, and by questioning a few folk who live nearby, I've learned that the concubines never leave the House and its grounds, save for an occasional trip to the palace to serve the King. The House guards and servants come and go regularly, though. The guards have their own barracks, while servants like Rupert reside in a separate wing of the House and are allowed to cook their own meals in the House kitchen. I'll have to figure out where that kitchen is and whether there's a schedule for its use.

As I walk, I rummage through the packages, choosing one at random. It contains a tin of nuts, which I begin munching as I stride toward the southwest gate of the palace. It's heavily guarded, but as Rupert Diggs, I'm known to the guards. They should let me through without question.

The nuts are decent, but I find myself longing for something more satisfying.

I must remember my priorities. Fuck Juliette first. *Then* get her to bake for me.

My stomach rumbles in protest. Fine... perhaps not in that order, after all.

"Evening, gents," I say casually to the guards at the pedestrian gate, a small archway to the left of the main one.

"You're cheerful tonight, Rupert," says one, smiling as he unlocks the gate for me. "Had a pint at the Old Jolly, did we?"

"Indeed." I nod to them and stroll through, continuing across the broad pavers of the outer courtyard, past the stables, barracks, and storage houses, and then along a lane that cuts between wide dark lawns, lantern-lit with intermittent yellow circles. To my right lie the grounds of the palace proper, another wall, and the jutting towers of the palace beyond that. Just ahead is the inner wall surrounding the House of Bounty, split by a gate bristling with spiked iron bars. It's a square within a square, the royal concubines' secure sanctum—or their prison.

Both guards at the gate wear crimson shirts beneath their armor, a sign that they are palace guards, not those who serve

within the walls of the House.

One of them hails me as I approach. “Busy day, eh, Rupert? Have you seen ‘em? The concubines?”

“We couldn’t catch so much as a glimpse of the last bunch,” complains another guard. “All shut up in wagons, they was.”

“Are they as beautiful as I’ve heard tell?” puts in the first guard. “How about magic? What kind of magic can they do?”

“To be honest, I’ve barely seen any of them,” I say. “Nor have we witnessed their magic. But when I get a good look at some of them, you’ll be the first to know. You want the report by hair color or tit size?”

The men laugh, but there’s a note of discomfort in the sound, and the first guard’s smile falls. Sympathy fills his gaze.

“By the goddess, Rupert—I ain’t heard you talk that way since before the King took your sausage and dumplin’s,” he says quietly.

Oh shit. I’m supposed to be a eunuch. I have to remember to act like one.

My silence seems to have dropped a pall of awkwardness over the two guards. One of them unlocks the gate hastily and moves back, allowing me through.

“Is everything... healing well?” asks the first guard, cautiously. His gaze drops to my crotch. I’m not erect now, but I’m well-endowed enough that there’s still a noticeable bulge between my legs. I’m suddenly glad that my tunic’s lower hem falls to mid-thigh.

“It’s healing as well as can be expected.” I give them a sorrowful nod. “If you don’t mind, I would like to rest. The walk has been... uncomfortable.”

“Of course, of course.”

Leaving them to mutter sympathetically behind my back, I mentally dip into my link with the real Rupert Diggs. My will commands his mind and elicits the memory I need. Apparently Diggs used to be a bodyguard to the King himself, until he was caught exchanging significant looks with the King’s most recent

mistress. He didn't touch the woman, barely spoke to her, but there was heat between them, and that was enough. The King witnessed the incautious look, ordered Diggs to be fully castrated that very day, and sent him to work at the House of Bounty, not as a guard, but as a common servant.

I suppose Diggs was lucky the King did not execute him. But perhaps it's worse to live surrounded by beautiful women and have no power or desire to enjoy them.

I hold the link just long enough to get a mental picture of where my chamber lies in the monumental house ahead. I can feel the real Rupert twitching in his spelled sleep, and I release the connection before his consciousness can start to resurface. I keep walking casually onward, enter the servant's wing, and make my way to the room in which I'll be living for the next day or so... or longer. I don't want to linger here too long, but I also refuse to bind myself to a schedule.

The room is plainly furnished, but comfortable. I'm used to all kinds of accommodations, from the loft in the stable of some unknowing farmer, to the empty summer cottage of a rich lord, to an abandoned Elvish mansion festooned with cobwebs and historical tapestries. This will do just fine, until I get what I came for.

I recline on the bed and search through Rupert Diggs' purchases, discovering a greasy, warm, paper-wrapped packet I didn't notice before. Swiftly I devour the small meat pies inside. Delicious, even if the crust was a bit heavy. I'll wager Juliette could bake better ones.

I count the money in his coin-purse—a surprisingly large sum for a simple servant of the House. He could purchase his own shop for that amount, and a cottage in the country, too—maybe a nice piece of land. Why is he still working here if he has access to that kind of money? Perhaps he collected on a bet.

With a shrug, I tuck the purse under the mattress. A thief I may be, but I've stolen enough from Diggs without taking his money. I won't use it unless I have to.

I wait a couple of hours to make sure most of the staff have cleared out of the servants' common areas, and then I carry some of Rupert Diggs' more perishable groceries down to the

kitchen, nodding to the only person I see along the way... a skittish-looking maid. I'm lucky that Rupert is a recent addition to the House of Bounty, not particularly well-known yet among its denizens. Any odd behavior on my part will be attributed to the trauma and the abrupt change of role that Rupert has had to endure.

The kitchen is huge and empty, lit by a single lamp which gleams on the copper pots and pans hanging from the ceiling rack. There are ovens and cupboards, counters and sinks, glossy painted tiles on the walls and reddish flagstones for the floor.

I dump the groceries on the table and poke around, peering into canisters and bread-boxes, then yanking open a door that breathes chilly air, no doubt leading down to the cold cellar.

I select a few of Rupert's items that should probably stay cool, and I wander down into the cellar. On one set of shelves are rows of bins, each labeled with what I assume is a servant's name, so I place the items in Rupert's bin. Not that I care about his possessions—I care about *food*, and I hate it when food is left to spoil or go to waste.

The rest of the food in the cold cellar looks more high-grade than the stuff on the servants' shelves. I saunter through the space, pulling off a few grapes here, using my pocketknife to slice off a sliver of cheese there, scooping a dollop of pudding out of a bowl with my finger.

There's a chart on the wall, where servants can sign up to use the ovens, stove, or other kitchen paraphernalia after hours, when their service to the House is done. There's also a servants' cupboard in the corner, where I stow the rest of Rupert's groceries on his shelf.

I've got the lay of the land here... time to explore elsewhere.

The kitchen lies at the border of the servants' wing, where it joins onto the House. As I continue down the hall and turn the corner, I encounter a drowsy-looking guard leaning against the wall. I walk past him casually without checking my pace, and he merely says, "Someone rang for you?"

Wincing, I nod. "I hope it's quick."

“Good luck.”

So there is security between the servants’ quarters and the rest of the House. Lucky for me it’s fairly lax.

Now to find Juliette.

The mind of the original Rupert won’t help me here. He might be familiar with the rooms that were prepared for the new concubines, but he won’t know which room is Juliette’s. What’s needed here is some good old-fashioned Elvish magic—the simplest of spells, one of the first I ever learned.

Most of the Kin use Elvish dialect when composing spells, but as a Half-Elf, I can use either Elvish or the human tongue, Arcspeech, with equal power, provided my words fit the rhythm and rhyme structure used by the Kin. There are plenty of poetic forms to choose from, but I usually go the simplest route—“the lazy path,” my teachers would have said... but as long as it works, why complicate it?

I take out Juliette’s little notebook, pressing it tightly between my hands, and I whisper a spell.

*Lost or taken,
found or forsaken,
seek the home of
the one who
did own you.*

The pliant leather warms my palms, and the book tugs slightly, as if it’s trying to get away from me. Grinning, I set off in the direction it wants to go.

Guards stand here and there along the hallways, but I distract them easily by casting the sound of footsteps down an adjacent corridor or laying a magical veil over their eyes for a few seconds. That’s as long as the veil lasts—to the count of five, and then it fades. Many’s the time I’ve wished I could extend its duration or expand it to cover more than one person’s vision; then I wouldn’t have to bother with disguises. But as a Half-Elf, I’m more limited than other Kin.

At last the notebook takes a sharp turn and flies out of my hands to bump lightly against a door. I snatch it and tuck it back in my vest pocket, glancing up and down the hall to make sure no one's coming.

The handle doesn't yield to my touch. They locked Juliette in, but the lock is no problem for me.

When I dressed in Rupert's clothes, I omitted his boots, partly because I didn't fancy tromping around in another man's smelly leather and partly because mine are extremely valuable. My boots were made by a pair of Elves in Lensterhaven. Enthel and her wife Lannau are both very pro-human and accommodating—they like to travel and lend their skills to impoverished shoemakers. They were happy to design me a pair of boots that fit both my feet and my unique needs. The boots have invisible pockets along the sides into which I can slip small items—miniature tools, tiny packets of spell ingredients, poison vials, that sort of thing.

I could do this with magic, but I prefer to save my energy. Reaching down to my left boot, I flip open the pouch containing my lockpick, and within seconds I have the door unlocked.

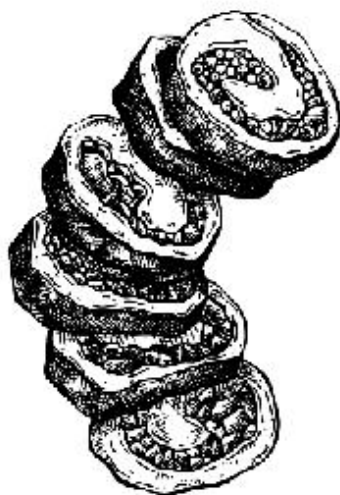
The notebook in my vest pocket is still lunging toward the door, so I end the spell with a quick rhyme of "Cease, peace," and it quiets.

My fingers curl around the elaborate handle of the door.

Time to seduce the pretty baker.

As I open the door quietly and slip into the room, my sensitive nose catches a whiff of something heavenly, something hot and sweet and fiercely delicious.

The angry tears of a beautiful woman.



JULIETTE

The baths we endured today weren't pleasant. We were escorted into a gorgeous, glittering bathhouse lined with tall windows, only to have our clothes torn unceremoniously from our bodies. Only by vociferous protest was I able to retain my own jewelry—my father's wedding ring and my mother's necklace.

We were hustled into the hot water, bare-ass naked, and scrubbed all over by silent, heavy-handed women who spoke not a word to us or to each other. Shenya whispered to me that she thought some of them were the concubines of the former king, demoted to the role of servants for the new crop of young women. Once she mentioned that possibility, I felt more sympathetic toward them.

Still, I did not enjoy having to spread my legs and lift my arms so another woman could roughly scrub all my folds, swells, and creases. Afterward being thoroughly shampooed, shaved, and rinsed, we were all spritzed with the same scent—apparently the King's favorite, a blend of licorice and almflower—a combination I detest.

The servants folded us into thick robes and hurried us along the upstairs hallways. They propelled each of us into a room, handed us a covered tray by way of breakfast, and closed the doors. Mine was locked from the outside with a significant click.

It was all very efficient. The King likes order. I suppose that's one thing in his favor.

I spent the rest of the day in my room. Since the moment I was locked in, my only interaction with people occurred when a maid brought me lunch at noon and my dinner around six. Those meals were also served on covered trays, which were later collected by the same maid. I tried asking her a few questions and was met with utter silence.

It's not that my room is unpleasant. The furnishings are quite lovely, featuring a peacock theme reflected in the patterns of the upholstered chairs, the colors of the bedding, and the mirror at the dressing table, whose frame features two golden peacocks lifting their wings to encircle the oval glass.

Despite the lateness of the hour, as proclaimed by the ornate porcelain clock on the dresser (also shaped like a peacock), I haven't been able to persuade myself to turn the lamp all the way down, nor have I been able to sleep, even though I've been lying in bed for what feels like ages. My mind keeps circling the problem at hand.

The king wants wives with magic. I have no magic. Whether I have magic or not, my fate is now sealed—I'll live out my days as a prisoner in this house, unless I can manage to escape. But judging by all the guards, the walls, and the locks, escaping would be a monumental task. There's one window in my room, and it's bolted shut. Even if I was desperate enough to smash through it, I'm not sure I could—the glass is unusually thick and the wooden frame looks equally solid. Beyond the window is a three-story drop to the ground, which is patrolled by more soldiers, and then there's the wall and the gate, with more guards on duty. Beyond that lies the outer wall of the palace compound—another obstacle, with more guards.

Which means that I've reverted to my original plan—waiting it out, keeping my head down, and hoping that a path of

escape will present itself.

But my brain still won't shut up. It continues to churn through the options, the possible scenarios, the risks and the benefits.

I yank the pillow from under my head, press it over my face, and groan aloud into its feather-stuffed depths.

"Why did this happen?" I whisper against the pillowcase. "Why, why? Why didn't I run? Why didn't I deny it? Why didn't I tell them right away that I couldn't do magic? Why did everyone stand there? Why did Prain do this to me?"

I haven't cried since we arrived, but as I murmur my brother's name, I picture his face, frantic and earnest as he voiced that great lie.

Tears well up, squeeze from the corners of my eyes, and slide over my temples into my hair.

Why? Why me?

Why would he do this to me, his family, his blood?

It's not fair. I've worked so hard. I wanted to do so many things. And to be traded like this—to be treated like cattle—why do we live in a kingdom where the King is allowed such liberties? I've heard of countries where the monarchs are checked and balanced by a council, a board of overseers, a group of lords, or even a collective of elected officials, including regular citizens with no titles or wealth. But here, in this land, the King's word is absolute. The lords who own the largest tracts of land have some influence with him, but even they seem cowed by his personality and his power. The military is firmly behind him. They like his penchant for conquest, and they admire his strength as a warrior, while the lords revere his charisma as a politician. At least, so I've heard through tavern-talk and market chatter. The King seems unassailable. Irresistible. Even if I did get out of the palace, I'd have to make it out of the city without being caught. And I couldn't go home. They'd look for me there.

Prain wrecked my life with that single careless speech, and as much as I wanted to save him, I'm beginning to feel a

choking, desperate, ferocious rage toward him. The rage forces more tears from my eyes until I let myself sob quietly, angrily.

My bed frame creaks, and the mattress dips at the end, near my feet, as if a weight has settled there. I shove the pillow aside and startle upright.

There's a man sitting at the end of my bed. He's dressed in the livery of a servant—a yellow shirt, a leather vest, dark pants with decorative X-stitching up the sides. He has blue eyes, dark brown hair, and a neat beard, closely trimmed. High cheekbones pair with straight, thick brows, giving him a striking look that could be a scowl if the corner of his mouth wasn't tilted in a wry smile.

“Don't stop on my account,” he says. “Cry all you like.”

I scoot farther away from him, conscious that I'm only wearing the plush robe they gave me after the bath. It's the sole piece of clothing in this room, so I decided to wear it rather than going naked. But robes have a tendency to loosen in bed, and this one is currently giving the stranger a generous view of my cleavage. I pull it together. “Get out, pervert, before I yell for the guards.”

“What are you afraid I'll do to you?” He pats his crotch. “We're all eunuchs here, remember?”

His voice sounds vaguely familiar, as if I've heard it somewhere before, but I can't place it.

“Eunuch or not, I don't want you in my room,” I tell him.

“I'll leave,” he says. “But first, tell me why you're crying.”

Maybe this servant is truly concerned or sympathetic, and he just has a strange way of showing it. Or maybe I'm doing that thing again—believing the best of people, even when their intentions are obviously bad.

Still, he's the first member of the House staff who has shown any interest in how I'm feeling. It couldn't hurt to have an ally here.

“I'm crying because I've been taken from my family and locked in this room until it's my turn to bed the King,” I tell him.

He shakes his head. “That’s not all of it.” He inhales through his nose, like he’s sniffing the air to catch a scent. “You’re not just sad and scared. You’re angry.”

I gnaw my lip and look away.

“Tell me,” he says. “Maybe I can help.”

“If I tell you, I’ll be punished.”

“Punished? Have you been a very bad girl?” His tone deepens with sensual suggestion.

I whip back around to glare at him. “I’m not joking. If the King hears of this, I could be killed. At the very least my brother will be hunted and possibly hanged.”

“So you’re thinking, with the stakes so high, why should you trust a stranger?”

“Exactly.”

“I’m about as untrustworthy as they come.” He lies back on the mattress, clasping his hands behind his head. “But our deal was, you tell me why you’re crying, and then I’ll leave. So until you confess, sweetheart, I’ll be right here.”

“I really will call for a guard,” I say.

“Do it then. I doubt he’ll hear you from his post at the end of the hall. These rooms are soundproof, sweetheart, to conceal the screams of sorrow or ecstasy from within. But if the guard does come, I’ll inform him that you’re hiding some dreadful secret. I’m sure he can summon a royal inquisitor who will dig that secret out of you in no time. There’s one inquisitor I’ve heard of who favors something called the ‘pear of anguish’—have you heard of it?”

“No, and I don’t want to.” I scoot off the bed, knotting my robe tighter. “Come on, pervert. Out with you.”

There are no weapons in the room—I’ve looked. The only thing that might serve as a weapon is the gilded hairbrush I used earlier, which has a relatively pointy end to the handle. I snatch it from the dressing table and march back to the intruder.

He chuckles. “What do you plan to do with that?”

“Smack you. Stab you. Otherwise encourage you to get your ass out of here.”

“You’re threatening me with a hairbrush?”

In answer, I smack his thigh with the back side of the brush. I’m a girl who loves to eat, but I also work damn hard, and I’m strong. I don’t think he expects the wallop I deal to his leg, because he yelps in surprise and sits up, clutching his thigh. “Ow!”

“Get up and get out!” I smack the other leg, then his hand. “Go!”

He clammers off the end of the bed to get away from me, and I land a particularly solid smack to his bottom.

“Would you settle down?” He holds out both hands in a pacifying gesture. “This is not how I wanted to—ow! Stop it!”

“Then leave,” I hiss.

“Tell me the other reason you were crying.” There’s no trace of a smile on his face now. “We made a bargain. Fulfill it, and I’ll go.”

I stand there panting, flushed, feeling the crinkle of the tears that have dried on my cheekbones. “The King only wants girls with magic. He wants a powerful wife as queen.”

“I’ve heard as much.”

“Well... I don’t have magic.” The words leave me in a rush. “My brother lied. He swore to the royal guards that I have powers of transmutation—turning one thing into another. He said I can turn straw into gold.”

The man laughs, then sobers again, peering at my face. “Oh, goddess... you’re serious. And they believed him? Straw into gold? Really?”

“They believed him. And now I’m stuck here. I can only hope they’ll test a bunch of the other women before they get to me.”

“No such luck for you, sweetheart,” he says. “Straw into gold? The moment the King sees that ability on the list, he’ll be

wildly aroused with greed. I wouldn't be surprised if they test you tomorrow."

"Oh goddess." A wave of faintness passes over me, and my heartbeat kicks into a terrifyingly fast rhythm. "What am I going to do?"

All of it crashes onto me at once—the titanic shift in the course of my life, my fear of being raped or killed, my anxiety about Prain—everything. I'm gasping, yet I can't seem to drag in a deep, satisfying breath. My dizziness spikes, making the room spin, slanting the floor—I can't keep my balance. I turn toward the bed, intending to lie down, but I can't seem to find it... I'm tilting, swaying, toppling over...

The stranger leaps up and catches me. He doesn't strain or exclaim at my weight, which is gratifying. He's broad and muscled, and for a second I'm glad of that strength.

Until I realize that his hand is cupping the underside of my right breast, squeezing ever so slightly.

"Pervert," I gasp. "Aren't you supposed to be a eunuch?"

"It's rude to ask about someone's parts," he counters. "Now, listen to me. You're panicking, and you need to breathe. Come on... deep breath, sweetheart."

I inhale, my chest and stomach swelling against his powerful arms.

"Mmm," he rumbles, his voice a masculine purr in my hair. His hold on me tightens a bit, and for a second I think I feel something hard against my bottom. But then he pulls away hastily, leaving me confused and flushed, yet somehow able to breathe again.

He *is* a eunuch, right? Like all the other men who work in the House of Bounty. There's no way I felt what I *thought* I felt. I'm dizzy and disconsolate, and the contact was so brief... it must have been his hipbone or his belt or something.

"Tomorrow, when they take you for testing, tell them these four things." He peers at me. "You listening?"

"Yes." I force myself to focus on his words instead of speculating about his genitals.

“They’ll demand a demonstration of your ability. Tell them that firstly, you need to be alone to perform the magic. Tell them that exercising your ability drains your energy, and that you must eat frequent, hearty meals to replenish it. Third, request that a servant be posted at the door to attend your needs and provide you with food. And lastly, tell them you need *time*. A day and a night.”

“What good will that do?” I plop onto the bed. “I won’t be able to accomplish anything, no matter how much time and privacy they give me.”

“Just do as I say.”

I frown at him. “You’re a servant. You can’t help me. Even if you managed to steal a roomful of gold and swap it out with the straw somehow...”

“You think I’d steal treasure for you?” He chuckles. “Not likely.” He saunters to the door. “Good night, Juliette.”

“Wait,” I exclaim as he’s leaving. “How did you know my name?”

But he has already closed the door.

What a strange man, and what a strange visit! I’m surprised no one overheard our conversation and came to investigate the presence of a male in the chamber of a potential bride. He said something about the rooms being soundproof, and when I think about it, I haven’t heard a sound from the hallway or the other chambers since I was brought here. Maybe he’s right, and the concubines’ suites have fortified walls to muffle sound. It would make sense, I suppose. I’m sure many loud sounds occur in this place, and it might cause trouble or distress if everyone could overhear the things that go on.

If the room is soundproof, my visitor didn’t come in because he passed by and heard me crying. He already knew where I was—he came to see me on purpose. He knew my name. Maybe, as a servant of the House, he glimpsed the list of prospective brides and took an interest in me. Or maybe...

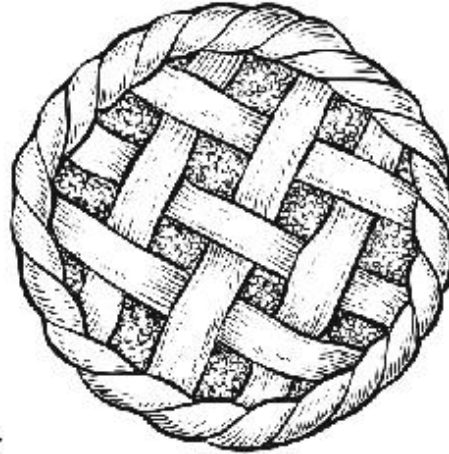
Maybe my test has already begun. Maybe he’s not just a member of the house staff, but someone appointed to gain my confidence and elicit the truth.

And I told him my secret.

I sink my face into my hands. Why, why did I confide in him? Why did he seem familiar? Why can I still feel the heat of his arms, the strength of his body as it upheld mine?

I roll over, grabbing one of the pillows and wadding it up under my head. The stress of his visit has tipped me over the edge into exhaustion, and I think I can sleep now. I'm almost sure I can.

And I do, but it's a restless sleep, threaded with dreams of a scruffy, blue-eyed man, his body bare and powerful, his limbs twined with threads of glimmering gold.



JULIETTE

I'm used to rising early—I'm a baker. And I don't mind waking early when it's on my terms, for the purposes of my business. But being woken early by a sour-looking maid, after the traumatic day I had yesterday—it's unpleasant to say the least.

After I dispatch my scanty breakfast of toast and fruit, the maid rakes my scalp roughly with a comb and proceeds to braid my hair in a tight, elaborate coiffure, despite my protests that I can prepare myself for the day. She slaps a corset around me as well, and spends several minutes straining at the laces until my ribs twinge with pain. When I voice a protest, the maid only jerks the corset tighter, so I shut up.

She helps me into a garnet-colored dress, a shade of red that perfectly complements my coloring. The neckline arches over my breasts, dipping low between them, and the sleeves encircle my upper arms, leaving my round shoulders bare. When she buttons the back, I find I can breathe well enough, if I'm careful about how I stand and sit. I can't take deep breaths, though, which makes me panic a little. I try not to think about

the limits on my air intake, and after a while my pulse slows down to a reasonable rate.

Next the maid paints my face copiously with makeup. She's doing her job, I suppose, but in the most vindictive way possible. Maybe Shenya is right... maybe she was a concubine of the former King, and she's angry about being relegated to this lesser role.

I can't see any way to confirm the suspicion, other than asking. "Were you a royal concubine once?"

She grips my chin more tightly than necessary and paints my lips crimson with her fingertip.

"So it's true... you were. What's your name?"

She wipes the excess lip paint from her finger onto a cloth.

"Look, I don't want to be here," I continue. "We're both trapped, both being forced into roles we don't want. Maybe we can help each other. Or at least talk sometimes."

She pauses, and for a moment our gazes lock.

She's in her mid-forties, I would guess. Her eyes are hazel, fringed by thick lashes... lovely, mournful eyes stricken through with anger. Her black hair is mostly covered by a cap, and she wears no makeup. Despite her dour expression, there's a haunting beauty about her.

She opens her full lips, stretching them wide until I can see the glistening stump in her mouth.

Her tongue has been removed.

"The King?" I whisper.

She nods.

"What about the other maids? Were their tongues removed as well?"

Another curt nod, and she holds up seven fingers.

Eight women, mutilated so they cannot speak.

"You and those other seven maids—you were all his father's concubines?"

Again she nods.

“But how can that be? How can the King commit such atrocities and yet no one knows about it?”

Her eyes narrow and her mouth twists. The message is clear: People know. They just don’t care, or they don’t dare challenge the King.

“No one from my village knows... at least, I don’t think they do.” They *couldn’t* know, could they? I can’t believe the people I care about, the ones I grew up with, would stay quiet and subservient if they understood what was happening here in the House of Bounty. They would protest, they’d stand up to the Crown...

And be executed or maimed themselves.

No one spoke out for me when I was taken. Not one of the people I’ve known all my life said a single word. Even if they thought I’d deceived them with hidden magic, I would have expected *someone* to protest, or to say goodbye at the very least.

But they did nothing, said nothing. Was it because they feared the King and his soldiers?

“So this is our King,” I say slowly. “Why does he treat people like this? Does he plan to do the same thing to the new concubines if we don’t please him?”

Answers churn in her gaze—words she can’t verbalize, though I can tell she desperately wants to. I glance around, looking for a pen and paper.

“Can you get me something to write with?” I ask. “We could communicate that way.”

She shakes her head frantically, glancing at the door.

“Ah, you’re right. It’s too dangerous to have things written down—someone might find them,” I reply. “But maybe there’s another way. Are you familiar with Elvensign?”

She frowns.

“I learned it from a girl who lived near our mill. She and I used to play together. She was born without speech, so she and her parents used Elvensign to communicate. I learned it too.

They have the same letters we use for Arcspeech, plus a few extra. I'll teach you the alphabet first, so you can spell out anything you like. Then we can work on the signs for common words."

Conflict churns in her eyes—hope, doubt, and fear intermingling.

"Come to me whenever you can, and I'll teach you," I say. "Words are power. The King took your tongue, but he can't take your voice."

Her lips compress tighter, and she reaches for a box she brought with her, opening it to reveal a fine necklace studded with semiprecious stones, the perfect complement to the garnet-colored dress.

"That's beautiful, but I'd like to keep wearing this." I touch the thin gold chain around my neck. "It was my mother's."

The maid hesitates, then nods. She removes the tiny studs I usually wear and adds large earrings in their place.

She's barely done fastening the second earring when my bedroom door flies open and two guards enter.

"Juliette Wetheris," barks one of them. "You are commanded to appear before the King, after which you will provide a demonstration of your powers of transmutation."

Shit.

When I hesitate, one guard shoves the maid aside and pulls me to my feet. "Sloth will not be tolerated in this House. Come along."

"I can't perform the transmutation in front of the Court," I say as I'm hurried out into the corridor. "I need privacy for the magic, and I need time."

"You will speak to His Majesty. He will decide how and when you serve him."

My stomach knots up, a nervous cramp. Earlier this morning I longed for a heartier breakfast, but now I'm glad I only had a little food. I only hope it stays in my stomach during my audience with the King. I can't imagine he'd take it well if I vomited all over the steps of his throne.

The guards escort me down to the first floor of the House of Bounty, then through a long hallway leading from the back of the House to the King's residence. We emerge into the royal palace through a guarded door, and I stifle a gasp at the change in scenery.

The House of Bounty is elegant and well-appointed, but the palace is a dizzying dream of elaborate luxury. The walls themselves look to be made of porcelain trimmed with exquisite gilded designs—wreaths and leaves, vines and flowers, leaping lions and galloping horses. In some rooms the furniture is dark, polished wood with jewel-toned upholstery. In others it is gleaming gold or sparkling silver, amid rich damask draperies or delicate gauzy curtains. The floors shine, pristine and glossy, reflecting dozens of lamps and candelabras.

We pass through a hall that features enormous portraits of past kings, each frame thrice my height. Then there's a reception area with powder-blue couches and crystal statues of hunting hounds. After crossing that room, the guards and I halt by a paneled door where a butler stands straight-backed and still, his hands tucked behind him and his chin lifted. He wears the crimson and black of the palace servants, and his puffed black sleeves are slashed to show gold silk within. Tight gold leggings complete the outfit.

"One of the potentials is here to see His Majesty," announces a guard. "Juliette Wetheris."

The butler nods and disappears through the door. After a moment he returns and waves us along.

As I step through, I realize that we're accessing the throne room by a side entrance. To my right lies a long path delineated by a colorful tile mosaic, leading all the way from a wide pair of double doors up to the steps of the throne. Courtiers cluster throughout the room, conversing quietly, and guards stand along the walls and at each corner of the dais.

Flanking the throne, two gigantic golden statues of horses rear high into the air, their hooves nearly touching the peak of the towering throne. It's a thing of beauty, that throne—pearly white stone threaded with opalescent glimmers of the rainbow. It's a throne of light and glory, of awe and of blessing. It

shouldn't belong to a man who would cut off pieces of his subjects and force gifted women to serve his pleasure.

Yet there he is—the King.

He looks nothing like his statue in the town square of my village. He's much older, for one thing, and he's coarser, too. Tanned from battle, with a massive jaw and a thick neck. His hair is brown, salted with gray at the temples and through his beard. He's a powerful-looking man, but not handsome. The pouches of swollen flesh around his eyes, the heaviness of his jowls, his toadlike mouth, and his pockmarked skin are all things I could overlook if I knew him to be a good man, but I understand his true nature now, so I would find him disgusting even if his features were perfectly symmetrical and his skin flawless.

He's wearing a shade of purple so deep it's nearly black, as if someone spilled ink on the beautiful throne. An opal-studded crown rests on his head.

To the right of his throne I spot a servant I didn't notice before—a boy of perhaps fifteen, dressed in the crimson-and-black livery of the palace. He waits quietly on hands and knees, like a dog who has been told to “stay.” On his back rests a silver tray with a goblet and a plate of cheese and fruits.

He is serving the King as a human table.

The guards escort me to the foot of the steps, below the throne. Gathering my skirts in both hands, I sink into the deepest curtsy I can manage, and I remain there until the King says. “Look at me, child.”

Child—I'm fucking twenty-seven. I'm no child. Although I suppose to a man of fifty-five I might seem young.

I look up at him, trying to appear meek and submissive.

He ogles my curves, my deep cleavage. “Beautiful. You're the one with the power of transmutation?” His eyes bore into mine.

This is the moment when I should confess the lie, admit my lack of power.

But I don't, because I'm terrified.

I hate that I'm so frightened of the King. I want to defy him, to be brave and condemn him for his cruelty. I want to stand up to him and shout that he doesn't deserve the throne, nor does he deserve the bodies, minds, and magic of the women I traveled with yesterday.

But I am afraid. Terrified of losing part of myself, literally—or of being killed. I'm terrified in a knee-shaking, muscle-liquefying, dry-mouthed, tight-throated kind of way, and in this moment I cannot defy him. I don't have that courage in me. Not yet.

“Is that your ability?” he repeats. “Transmutation?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“How does it work?”

“Well...” I clear my throat, trying to remember what the stranger told me to say. Not that I trust him, but without any strategy of my own, his ideas are better than nothing. “Transmutation drains my energy quickly, and I must eat frequently to regain it. To accomplish the best result, I must be alone and unobserved while I turn the straw into—”

“We won't go into the specifics of your abilities here,” he says quickly, with a glance past me at the groups of courtiers. “I prefer that you demonstrate them in private. When you leave my presence, you'll be taken to a room full of straw, where you can work. How much time do you need?”

“A day and a night, depending on how much straw there is,” I say, with a casual confidence I don't feel. “And if Your Majesty would permit, I would like a servant at the door, both to keep out intruders and to bring me sustenance when I need it.”

“It shall be done.” He drums the arm of his throne with meaty, ring-laden fingers. Involuntarily I picture those fingers groping my body, and I nearly lose my breakfast. I struggle to breathe through the nausea, but it's difficult thanks to the corset.

“If you can do as you say, you'll be my favorite,” says the King, with a toadlike smile.

“I'd be honored, Your Majesty,” I manage.

I barely get the words out before the same guards who escorted me to the throne room advance again, pulling me to my feet. One soldier maintains a grip on my upper arm—not too tight, but it’s a warning all the same.

As we leave the throne room and traverse more hallways, I try to rake together my scrambled thoughts and sort out my emotions.

I’m angry, so angry I’m trembling, and I’m still sick with fear, because I’ve bought myself a day and a night, but after that I won’t be able to hold off my fate any longer.

We’re descending stone steps, and the chill of the air makes my heart sink, because this part of the palace feels subterranean. Like an underground jail. Which means there’s even less chance of escape.

“I need a servant,” I say breathlessly. “Someone to bring me meals.”

“Go fetch one of the servants from the House of Bounty, Hutch,” says one of my guards to the other. “Someone who can double as door guard and errand boy.”

Hutch nods and hurries off.

The remaining guard ushers me to the end of a long, dark, stone hallway. He takes out a key and unlocks the heavy door, hauling it open with a grinding squeal of iron on stone.

“This is your workspace for the next day and night,” he says. “Your servant will be posted outside, and there will be a guard posted halfway down the hall and another at the far end.”

I move forward tentatively, peering into the room. It’s paved with rough, flat stones, barely visible between the stacks of loose straw piled up to the ceiling. There’s a big iron lantern hanging from a chain overhead, and two more lanterns flanking the door. In the center of the room sits a low wooden bench and a large spinning wheel. One corner of the chamber contains stacks of wooden boxes, each holding countless empty bobbins, ready to be filled with threads of pure gold.

The guard on my right clears his throat. “The room was set up last night. They weren’t sure if you needed an actual

spinning wheel to accomplish the magic, so they provided one. Just in case.”

“How thoughtful.” I scan the room again, all the way up to the high ceiling. No windows. “What if I need to relieve myself?”

“This is part of the dungeon,” says the guard in a condescending tone. “Prisoners use slop buckets for waste.”

“But I’m a potential bride.”

“That you are,” he says, reluctantly, as if he would rather force me to use a bucket. “When the need arises, let your servant know and you’ll be escorted to the guards’ privy around the corner.”

I don’t understand why this man, whom I’ve never seen before today, wants me to suffer the indignity of a slop bucket. What did I ever do to him? Why should he relish the thought of a stranger’s discomfort? Are people really that cruel? I suppose he must be dreadfully unhappy, and he takes it out on others. His yellow tunic marks him as a guard in the House of Bounty, which means he’s a eunuch. Did he choose this life willingly, or was it forced upon him?

His sandy brows pull together. “What are you staring at, girl?”

“Just wondering what kind of person you are,” I say.

He fixes me with a glare. “Get your ass in the cell.”

As I back away from him, into the room full of straw, panic flares hot in my chest. If that door closes and locks, I think I might lose my mind. This room can’t be the last place I see before I die—it can’t.

“I need some water!” I blurt out as he reaches to pull the door shut.

“Fine.” He rolls his eyes, then calls to another guard who’s approaching along the hallway. “Larrick, fetch the King’s concubine some water.”

Hearing myself called “the King’s concubine” nearly makes me vomit. I swallow, trying to breathe as deeply as I can

despite the corset—inhale through the nose, exhale through the mouth.

By the time Larrick returns with the water, Hutch is coming back too, accompanied by the servant who will be tending to my needs for the next day and night.

And by some stroke of luck or fate, that servant is the same blue-eyed stranger who showed up in my bedroom.

It's all I can do not to let a shocked "what the fuck" escape my mouth. Instead I pinch my lips together and stare at him.

He doesn't wear his livery neatly like the other servants—there's a rough-and-tumble look about him, a scruffy nonchalance. His vest hangs askew, his tunic is wrinkled as though he slept in it, and his hair sticks straight up along the crown of his head. His pants look just slightly too short for his long legs.

"I found Rupert wandering around the House. I thought he'd be the perfect man for the job," Hutch explains. "He used to be a guard, and he knows the palace ways."

"He was castrated and demoted for ogling the King's mistress," snaps the guard beside me. "You'd place him in the service of a highly-gifted royal concubine?"

"He's learned his lesson, haven't you, Rupert?" Hutch claps the blue-eyed servant on the shoulder. "He'll mind himself. Give him a chance."

Rupert gives the doubtful guard a bow that rides the line between subservient and saucy. Then he advances, placing his hand on the open door of the cell like he's swearing a vow. "I hereby devote myself to His Majesty's lady."

"You'd better serve the King well in this, or you'll lose your tongue, too," mutters the guard. "Make sure she doesn't try anything—she's a feisty one."

"The feisty ones are the worst, sir," says Rupert. "I'll be sure to curb any misbehavior."

"Very well. To your posts, all of you! Hutch, take the midpoint of the hall—Larrick, you're at the end." He sets the pitcher of water Larrick brought on the floor of my cell. As he

straightens, he looks into my eyes and hisses low, venomous words. “You’d best work your magic fast and well, missy. The king hates being disappointed. Tongues, dicks, and balls aren’t the only things he likes to cut off.”

Before I can respond, he slams the door. There’s the scrape of a key and the *clank* of the lock, then the retreating thump of booted feet.

The door has no window. I’m alone in a gloomy chamber full of straw, with a thick slab of wood and metal between me, the guards, and blue-eyed Rupert.

I want to bang on the door right away and ask Rupert if he has a plan. He *must* have a plan, or he wouldn’t have suggested this arrangement.

But why would he help me? Why should he even care about my fate, when my own brother didn’t?

No... I’m being a fool, imagining rescue where there is none. There’s no plan, no help, no hope. I’m stuck here, in this chamber filled with straw, with that stupid spinning wheel mocking me for claiming to possess magic.

I’ll languish here for a day and a night, maybe less, and then they’ll figure it out. They’ll know I lied. The King will know I played him for a fool, and I’ll end up mutilated and silent, if I don’t hang from the nearest gallows first.

Panic swells in my chest, turning my breaths shallow and frantic.

This can’t be happening again. Before last night, I hadn’t suffered an attack like this since my father’s funeral—and now I’m having the second one in two days?

At least it’s not happening in front of the other potential brides. Curse this corset... my head is reeling, and my dizzied mind tells me I’m going to faint if I can’t manage a deep breath. I need to get out of this restrictive clothing, but I can’t do it alone.

Staggering forward, I pound on the door. “Hello? I need help in here!”

Strange... there's something stuck to the inside of the door—a tiny, round mirror no bigger than my palm, with red-and-blue enameled edges.

I pry at it for a second, but it's stuck tight. Mysterious mirrors are the least of my worries, at least until my lungs can expand properly.

I pound on the door a few more times, but I can't keep going—I can't breathe—can't drag a good satisfying gulp of air into my constricted lungs. I need someone to tear this corset off, cut it off, burn it off—I need it gone... but my knocks are half-hearted now, and I'm sliding to the floor... venting tight, choked sobs while black spots dance in front of my eyes. Tears flood my vision, and sparks swim through the tears while I bend over and try desperately to *breathe*. My heart is galloping at a breakneck pace, a terrifying pace, so fast I'm sure no heart can stand that speed for very long...it's going to give out entirely, I just know it...

I let myself slump over onto the floor with my cheek against the cold stone, a bit of straw tickling my arm. Still can't breathe properly... my heart won't stop racing... my eyes close.

Sound and smell blur together... a low squeak of hinges and the scent of leather, pine, and peppery heat. I'm rolled unceremoniously onto my belly. Someone is unfastening all the buttons of my dress—hauling me to a sitting position, then dragging the garment off, over my head. I have to shift my position so the skirt can pull free without tearing.

The dress is off, but I'm still panicking, still fighting to breathe, my eyes squeezed shut.

A series of sharp *pops*, like taut cords breaking, and the corset bursts open.

I draw air into my lungs, filling them all the way to the bottom. It's beyond satisfying, and tears of relief bathe my cheeks. "Oh goddess," I gasp. "Thank you... thank you."

"The goddess didn't help you, though, did she?" scoffs a male voice. "Let's give credit where it's due."

I can't see his face. I can only hear his voice. And suddenly I remember where I've heard it before.

By the fountain in Maystead.

The hooded stranger.

I scramble away from him as fast as I can, snatching up the discarded gown and pinning it over my breasts as I turn to face him.

It's him. The blue-eyed stranger... Rupert, or whatever he's called.

"You're supposed to be outside the door, not in here with me," I say breathlessly.

"I *am* out there."

"But you're in here. People can't be in two places at once."

"Sure they can. See this mirror? I stuck it to the inside of the door before the guard locked you in, and its mate is secured to the outside of the door under a cloaking spell. Thanks to the mirrors, a reflected image of me will stand outside that door for as long as my energy can sustain it. It won't mirror what I'm doing in here, but it will mimic the natural motions I might carry out while standing guard. It's called a doppelganger charm. Unfortunately it's a one-time use... at midnight on the day it's first activated, the mirror cracks and the thing becomes useless, inert. It belonged to my father. I wonder if he has noticed it's gone..."

"That's Elvish magic." I clutch the dress tighter to my chest. "Only Elves can craft such things."

"True."

"Why do you have an Elvish relic? They're forbidden. And why are you here? What's all this about?" My voice trembles. "Are you the man I met by the fountain in Maystead? If you live here in Giltos, why were you *there*? What do you want? Why did you visit my room, and why—"

My voice is rising in pitch and volume. He darts forward to where I'm sitting on the floor, drops to his knees, and presses his hand over my mouth.

"Not so loud. Remember, there's a guard down the hall. He can't hear us if we speak normally, but if you continue to berate

me in that tone he will notice, and he'll come to investigate. Then we'll both suffer."

I twist my face aside, but he keeps his palm over my mouth and moves in closer. My eyes widen as his face approaches mine.

And then his tongue traces along my wet cheek, a slow, sensuous lick, finishing with a flourish over my cheekbone.

His warm breath flutters across my lips. "You were crying again."

"You needed to *lick* me to determine that?"

"Didn't need to. Wanted to." He grins. "You're very lickable."

There's something so odd about him. He's like no one I've ever met—disturbing and charismatic by turns, with a thread of awkwardness in his behavior, as if he's unused to being around people and his charm has grown rusty.

I'm used to the attention of men. I've been clumsily courted, boldly wooed, and drunkenly praised, but I've never been half-nude on a stone floor in my petticoat, shrinking against a haystack while a broad-shouldered man with gleaming blue eyes tastes my tears.

I've never felt my whole body quiver to life at the nearness of his broad chest, his lean hips, his powerful arms, his mouth.

And for a second I forget everything else except the way I feel when he's braced over me—cautious, yes, maybe even scared, but also wildly, keenly, crisply *alive*, and eager, and hungry.

His right hand finds my side—the bare flesh exposed by the destruction of the corset. His fingers traverse my skin, then hook beneath my thick thigh and lift it, sudden and demanding.

"Aren't you a eunuch?" I breathe.

"Again with that question." He rolls his eyes. "Why don't you find out?"

Curiosity and temptation conspire in my mind, and I slide my hand along his inner thigh as he leans over me. My cheek

brushes against the dark scruff along his jaw as I reach between his legs and find hard, unmistakable proof that yes indeed, this man is intact, balls and all. I squeeze a little just to be sure.

He lets out a low groan. “Easy on the purse, sweetheart.”

So he’s not a eunuch. He’s in disguise here, among the denizens of the palace and the House of Bounty.

I tip my head back—which is a mistake because his face is *right there*, and those eyes—they’re almost too beautiful for his roughly handsome face.

My lips tingle, traitorously magnetized, called to his mouth. They *want* to know what his lips feel like.

“What do you want?” I manage.

“I’d like to help you.”

“I think you want to help yourself.”

Uncertainty shadows his face for a second. As if he isn’t quite sure of his own purpose here—what his true wishes are. That moment of doubt, of vulnerability, strengthens me.

I scoot farther back, wincing at the prickly straw poking my skin, and I climb to my feet, still holding the gown in front of my breasts. “Explain how you can help me. Slowly and clearly.”

He nods, rising as well. “The King expects you to turn all this straw into gold, yes?”

“Yes.”

“And you have no magic.”

“Not a drop.”

He hooks an eyebrow. “Magic isn’t measured in drops.”

“You know what I mean. No drops, drams, dregs, or dollops of magic here.” I look down at myself.

A suggestive smirk tilts the corner of his mouth. “I’ll wager there’s magic in you. In the right hands—”

“You have magic, though, don’t you?” I cut in. “Not just Elvish artifacts or trinkets. You’ve got real magic. You’re a

sorcerer.”

“No.”

“Then... what are you?”

Even as I speak the words, his ears change, extending into points. It's as if they're growing, or perhaps being unveiled. A chill of surprise and delight races through my body.

“You're an Elf,” I breathe.

“Half-Elf. And I'd rather no one knew about it, so if you'll kindly keep the knowledge to yourself, I'll be grateful.”

“I've never met an Elf.” I'm smiling—I can't help it. I shouldn't be able to smile in this situation, but I'm honestly so pleased to meet a member of the Kin. “I thought the Elves of Darthage all stayed deep in the Riddenwold.”

“Most Elves stay there, yes.” His smile is stiff, edged with pain. “Not everyone with Elvish blood is accepted in that haven.”

“Your own people kicked you out?”

“Kicking me out would have been kinder—a clean break to the bone, instead of gradually chipping away at it, splinter by splinter. No, they simply let me know, every day, that I was different. That I did not belong. That I have human blood, and that as such, I would never quite fit in among them.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Don't be sorry,” he says curtly. “You asked how I can help—I can solve this problem for you. I can turn this straw into gold.”

I stare at him blankly. “Elves can do that?”

“We can do all sorts of things.” Again with that hooding of his eyes, that sensual grin.

“Let's get something straight. I will not be fucking you in exchange for your help. If you assist me, you'll be doing so out of the goodness of your heart, and not because you expect carnal favors in return.”

“The goodness of my heart?” He chuckles. “By the green grass and the sky above—I don’t think I possess the sort of unselfish goodness you’re looking for. I’ll help you, but I demand payment. And if you won’t prostitute yourself to save your pretty skin, then you must pay me some other way.”



THE TRICKSTER

Juliette's face falls at my pronouncement. She has large, lovely eyes, rimmed with thick lashes that are still damp with tears. She's standing before me half-naked, the white petticoat cloaking her lower half and the red gown clutched to her chest. Her hair tumbles in glossy, nut-brown waves around her creamy shoulders. She's flushed, fighting to stay in control of her emotions, but she's far too human for that. Her white teeth pinch her rosy lower lip as she glances away, thinking over my statement.

I want her so badly I could scream. I wanted her last night, but the moment was all wrong—I couldn't bring myself to seduce her then. For some reason all I could think about was comforting her, calming her anxiety.

I've bedded my share of pretty women, but it's always been a quick interlude—one night, and then I'm off again, journeying elsewhere. I've already known Juliette longer than any other human woman I've encountered, and I've gone through far more trouble for her than anyone I know, Elvish or human.

"I don't have anything to offer you," she says quietly.

I could press the matter, remind her of the fate that awaits her when the King discovers her deception. If I played my cards right, she'd give in—I can feel it. She'd let me fuck her in exchange for my help.

But I don't want her like that. I don't want her coerced or convinced—I want her crawling to me of her own free will, clutching my feet and licking my cock, begging me to take her.

I want her hungry for me.

Besides, there is something else I need from her in order to perform the spell I have planned.

“What's that around your neck?” I ask, pointing to the thin gold chain.

She touches the heart-shaped pendant. “My mother's necklace.”

“Give me that, and I'll save you.”

“No.” Her fingers curl protectively around the trinket.

“As you wish.” I head for the door. “Best of luck with His Majesty.”

As I touch the door handle, she exclaims, “Wait!”

Too easy. I smother a smile and turn slowly around. “Yes?”

She unclasps the necklace and holds it out to me, her face haunted but confident.

The minute the necklace touches my palm, I can tell it's real gold. Good. That, along with her intense connection to the item, will make the spell so much easier.

“Transmutation is a complicated gift, very rare.” I run the thin chain of the necklace between my fingers, eyeing the piles of straw in the room. “I don't have the gift myself, but I know a few spells I can combine to create the effect we want. I'll need your help.”

“Anything.” In her eagerness she lets the dress she's holding slip, and I'm treated to a brief glimpse of her beautiful tits, round and heavy and just as luscious as the rest of her. She swears and covers herself again, throwing a glance at the corset on the ground.

“You ruined it,” she complains.

“It was suffocating you.”

“But I do need a corset. Without the support, my back starts to hurt.”

“I can imagine, toting those things around...” I nod at her tits. “Fucking gorgeous, they are. I’ve never seen a pair so fine.”

Her cheeks flush a deeper scarlet. “Well... thank you, I suppose.”

“I can repair the corset strings, if that’s what you want.”

“Yes please. And help me tie it. Just not quite so tightly as before.”

I tuck her mother’s necklace into my pocket. Picking up the damaged undergarment, I speak a rhyme in Elvish, a couplet for the repair of small items. The rhyme doesn’t work for anything with missing pieces, but since I simply broke the strings, it serves well enough in this case.

Holding the corset, I advance cautiously toward Juliette, whose brown eyes flame with warning and... am I imagining that hint of desire?

“You’re going to have to put that down.” I nod to the dress she’s holding.

She swallows, then lets the gown fall.

I have never seen anything more beautiful than her body, with its softness and roundness, with the chocolate silk of her hair slipping over her smooth skin, one curl lying against her nipple, drawing my eye to its pink bud. Her eyes are downcast, shy, yet she was bold enough to bare herself to me.

My mind goes blank. I can’t remember where I am or what I was about to do—what I’m holding or who I am.

“Rupert!” she snaps, and it takes me a moment to recognize the name of my assumed identity.

“Um, right.” As she raises her arms, I slide the corset over her head and body. She settles its cups over her breasts, lifting and tucking until everything is right, then holding the front of the corset in place while I stand there like an idiot, gaping.

“Fasten it,” she reminds me.

I clear my throat. “Of course.”

Thankfully the contraption is already laced up, and I merely have to tighten everything and tie it off. She smells of licorice and almflower—a false scent imposed over her natural fragrance, which is earthier, richer, with a hint of vanilla.

“Help me with the dress,” she says.

“Are you sure you can breathe in it?”

“Yes, now that the corset is looser. Don’t button it all the way up, though.”

I obey, slowly, reluctantly. It seems a travesty to cover up her skin, to seal her back into the garnet gown, the husk that the King gave her.

About halfway up the back of the dress, I quit buttoning.

She turns around, adjusting the low-cut neckline. “You behaved very well,” she says primly. “Good boy.”

At those two words, a ferocious lust roars in my head, and I nearly grab her right then. But I manage to hold myself back.

She has rerouted my plans entirely. Taken me by the head, like a restive horse, and swerved me into this contest, this race against the King’s displeasure. I don’t care about humans and their politics, or Elves and theirs. I care about keeping my belly full and my balls empty. I find amusement in jokes, tricks, theft, and small acts of subversive magic. I meant to fuck this girl and leave her, yet I’ve managed to do neither of those things. Instead I’m about to perform the most complex spell of my life, for her benefit, without the promise of any “carnal favors” in return.

I must be ill. I must have some sort of infection or disease, maybe a brain-worm addling my mind. Maybe the real Rupert is a secret sap, and his emotions or characteristics are affecting me somehow.

I’ve been silent for too long—Juliette’s eyes are narrowed, and she’s peering at me with mingled curiosity and concern. “Are you alright?”

I shake myself a little. “Just preparing for the spell. Grab some of that straw for me.”

She seizes a bunch of it and brings it over, while I seat myself on the little bench behind the spinning wheel. Oddly enough, the wheel’s presence works in my favor. Transmutation spells require a fixed constant, a point around which the changing material can flow, and the wheel is as good a locus as any.

I take the straw from Juliette’s arms. “Once the spell starts, keep feeding the straw into the stream.”

“The stream?” Her eyes gleam with interest.

“You’ll see. Be ready.” With difficulty, I push her out of the forefront of my mind. Devious woman, conquering my thoughts like this... but I’m not her slave. I can resist her charms—

She’s leaning over my shoulder, her hair swinging distractingly in my field of vision. Almflower and vanilla...

“Don’t stand so close to me,” I snap.

“Fine.” She steps back, crossing her arms.

Grasping a handful of straw, I lay it against the wheel, remove the gold necklace from my pocket, and close my eyes. I’m holding straw in one hand, gold in the other, and now I must create the link between them.

The necklace is delicately crafted, reinforced with memories. It sings of love and security, but there’s a note of bittersweet loss, too. Gold, precious and beautiful, all too easy to melt and mold.

I have the essence of the necklace firmly in my mind now, so I turn my attention to the straw. It was recently harvested from a field where it ripened beneath a bright blue sky. Its scent is sun-warm, sweet and fresh. I let it sink into my consciousness, and I visualize that sweetness growing heavier, the yellow deepening to gold, stalks melting into pliant lines of liquid metal.

Within the fleshly hollow of my hand

Let grass divide into its separate parts

*And fuse with gold upon my will's command,
A chain exquisite, forged from beating hearts
And memory, within this spell infused,
Lend life and purpose to the flowing force
Twine with the wheel, what's given is reused,
One substance to another in due course.
Both memory and nature here I hold,
Transform this stack of straw to thread of gold.*

As I murmur the rhyme, I can hear Juliette shifting her weight from one foot to the other, probably aching to ask me questions, but to her credit, she stays silent.

Energy begins unspooling from inside me, as if I have a full skein of it tucked away in my chest, and it's slowly uncoiling, slithering out of my body and into the spell. I must stop before I reach the end of that skein, but knowing when to quit isn't an exact science. I usually use my hunger as a marker. When I'm unbearably famished, I'll need to end this and eat.

When Juliette gasps, I know that my spell is working. I open my eyes and there is a perfectly conjured circle of transmutation, a vertical ring of sparkling golden light around the spinning wheel. The straw is already changing as Juliette's necklace dissolves into the glow. The jewelry is gone for good, but its essence will guide the transformation of the straw. I have to keep the circle going now, as long as possible, because if it stops, I won't be able to restart it without another gold object, one that means something to her.

"Oh my goddess," Juliette breathes, one hand pressed to her heart. "It's actually happening." Her eyes swerve to mine, alight with wonder. "You're incredible."

That look. Those words.

No one has ever said that to me, or looked at me that way. I'm stunned for a second, wordless. I don't like to analyze my own emotions but damn... that did something to me, deep down.

“More straw,” I order sharply, working the pedal and spinning the wheel.

Juliette hurries to seize more, then hesitates, staring wide-eyed at the whirling ring of magic. “Where do I put it?”

“Just feed it in, and then hand me a bobbin.” The first thread of liquid gold is already emerging from the transmutation circle. “Hurry!”

She picks up a whole box of bobbins and sets them beside me.

“Put one there.” I nod to the wooden spoke and she sets the bobbin in place. Even before I ask, she catches the end of the thick golden thread and winds it around the bobbin, giving it a head start. It coils smoothly around, while I pump the pedal and spin the straw, sustaining the magic with my own energy.

Juliette runs to get more straw before I ask her, and we fall into a frantic rhythm, she and I. The pedal clunks, the magic glitters, the wheel turns and the bobbin spins, eating up the golden thread until it’s full. Juliette trots back and forth, feeding straw into the spell, stacking up the full bobbins and replacing them with empty ones. She’s a tireless worker, and she has an eye for the most efficient way of doing things. I’ve never been hard-working or efficient, but I can admire those qualities in others.

“Anyone would think you’ve done this before,” I tell her.

She shrugs. “It’s easy.”

“Easy?” I snort.

“I’ve accomplished far more complex tasks.”

“Right, the baking.”

“And running the mill, and filling orders for local inns and shops. Bookkeeping, supply lists, unloading stock, hiring workers, conducting repairs—”

“Stop, stop,” I groan. “I hate hard work—you’re exhausting me just by talking about it.”

“What you’re doing right now is work.”

“Not really. It takes energy, yes, but it’s simply a matter of upholding the spell, keeping everything moving.”

She feeds another armful of straw into the transmutation circle, her full lips pursed in thought. “I do work hard. But I like it. It’s fulfilling. Sure, there are some boring bits, but I enjoy most of what I do. Besides, each task is a step toward what I really want.”

“Hmm.” I touch the transmutation circle lightly, feeling the buzz of the magic as it spins. “Maybe that’s the trick to liking work. Doing something you enjoy, with an end goal in mind. What’s yours?”

“Building a solid business that can sustain me and my brother. I want us to thrive, to build wealth, not just eke out an existence. My family has been riding the edge of poverty for generations. I want to change that.”

“Good news,” I say dryly. “Once the King sees this roomful of gold, you’ll be on your way to a crown and a throne.”

“I don’t want either of those things,” she says. “I don’t want to be Queen—especially not *his* Queen.”

“Then why are we doing this?”

“Survival,” she mutters. “Buying time until I can figure out how to escape from here.”

“I thought you wanted a shot at the crown, but you want to *escape*? Why didn’t you say so before?”

“I thought it was heavily implied.” She narrows her eyes at me. “Could you do that? Help me get away?”

“Of course. Everything is possible with magic. But once I get you out of the palace, what’s your plan?”

“Leave the city, of course. And then... I suppose I’ll have to run.” Her face falls. “I can’t go back home to the mill, or the King will find me there and imprison me again. Everything I’ve worked so hard to gain—I can’t get any of it back, can I?”

“I suppose not.”

“I keep circling around and around in my head—coming back to the same horrible truth. I can’t accept it yet—that everything is gone. That I can’t undo any of this. That my life has changed forever, and I won’t ever be able to go home...” Her voice cracks and trails off.

I cock my head, my nostrils flexing in spite of myself. “Are you going to cry again?”

“You’re heartless,” she snaps, plucking the full bobbin off the spindle and setting an empty one in place. “And why are you so fascinated when I cry?”

“Elves don’t cry.”

She stares at me. “Really?”

“Really. We—they—don’t believe in showing too much emotion. In Elvish society, a stoic nature is perceived as attractive and admirable.”

“But I thought Elves were all about mischief, tricks, rhymes, laughter, music, and the enjoyment of nature,” Juliette counters.

“That’s how it used to be, I suppose. Since the Withdrawal, when we separated ourselves from human society, our Elders teach sobriety and stoicism. A bit of laughter is permitted—some minor expressions of happiness or disappointment—but anything deeper must be suppressed. We are encouraged to meet the most thrilling good news and the most dreadful tragedy with equal calm.”

“Sounds like apathy to me.”

“When you see the world spinning out of control, and there’s nothing you can do to stop it, you either drive yourself mad by caring too much—or you stop caring.” The last bobbin she placed is slightly off-kilter, and the thick, smooth thread is winding itself unevenly, so I reach out and tweak its position, still working the pedal with my foot. “The Elves saw how humans were spreading across the world, chopping down forests, hunting the noblest of creatures, razing wildflower fields to plant crops, pumping out smoke from new machines, and starting wars that soaked the soil with blood. It hurt them too much, so they withdrew. Washed their hands of it all.”

Juliette pinches off the gold thread, takes the full bobbin, and hands me another. I start winding the thread onto the new spool, conscious that my internal energy is waning fast.

“So full-blooded Elves never mingle with humans?” she asks.

“Some do, but they usually have to hide their ears and dim the glow of their eyes,” I tell her. “I know two full-blooded Elvish women who have lived among humans for years, in the town of Lensterhaven. A married pair, and the best Elvish cobblers I know. They made me these boots.” I nod to my right foot, which is pressing the pedal.

Juliette bends, inspecting the boots with interest and rewarding me with a delectable view of her breasts. But I can’t enjoy it to the fullest, not when I’ve spent so much magic already.

I can’t do this much longer, and there’s still a lot of straw in the room. Thankfully my link with the original Rupert will remain intact, since that spell is self-contained and already complete. Even if my energy is drained to the dregs, my disguise won’t fail as long as the tiny glass jar remains in my pocket or close at hand.

But I can’t leave this job partly undone. To thoroughly convince the King of Juliette’s ability, to spare her from his wrath, every bit of the straw must be converted into gold.

“We need to move faster,” I tell her. “My energy won’t last long, and when it runs out, the spell will end.”

“Will you be alright?” She frowns, gathering up another armful of straw.

When was the last time someone cared about my wellbeing? “I’ll be starved and weak for a while, but after a hearty meal I’ll be fine.” Unless I let things go too far.

“But you’ll have to fetch the hearty meal,” she says. “Will that be difficult if you’re weak?”

“I’ll manage.”

Her brow puckers with worry, and she gathers more straw, feeding handfuls into the wheel more quickly than before.

We continue working in silence for a long time. I barely know her, and yet I can tell that she's stewing over some problem or question, something she's aching to mention.

At last, she comes out with it. "I still don't understand why you're doing this."

"Maybe I'm bored."

"You're so bored you followed me here and finagled your way into the House of Bounty?"

"Maybe I've always worked here."

"You said you don't like hard work, and you're a Half-Elf." Her brown eyes pierce mine shrewdly. "No, you're here under an assumed name, pretending to be someone you're not. Did you kill the real Rupert?"

"No. He's quite comfortable, enjoying a charmed sleep while I use his identity."

"So you don't really look like this?" She gestures to my face and body, disappointment shadowing her gaze.

"Aww, Juliette... you like the look of me." I grin at her.

She bristles and blushes. "No, I just—I wondered—"

"This is my true face. The spell only makes me look like Rupert to those who would recognize him. He and I are similar in build and coloring, which makes the ruse easier."

"If your name isn't Rupert, what is it?"

I hold my smile in place, even as a chill thrums through my body.

My real name is a chain. A weapon. Shackles and slavery.

"Telling you my name isn't part of our bargain." My voice sounds cold and hard, even to me. As if my father is speaking through my throat.

Juliette's pretty face tightens with confusion. "I was only asking. It's a normal thing to ask, you know, when you first meet someone."

"You didn't ask me last night."

“Last night I didn’t care to know,” she retorts. “You were an intruder in my bedroom. One doesn’t usually ask burglars and brigands their names.”

“I’m still a burglar and a brigand. A thief, a wanderer, a rogue, and a trickster. You can’t trust me.”

“So you’ve said. And yet.” She holds her arms out, palms up, indicating the room around us.

It’s empty.

I’m spinning the last bit of straw. And I still have a little energy left.

“We’ve done it.” I reel off the last of the golden thread and order the spell to cease as I snatch the full bobbin from its spoke, rise from the bench, and hold the shining thread high. “We’ve done it!”

Juliette laughs and claps her hands, bouncing on her heels. Her excited smile transforms her face. She’s beautiful always, but when she smiles... *fuck*. My stomach flips over, thrills racing through my chest.

No one has ever affected me like this. What magic does she possess?

“What was in that muffin you gave me?” I demand abruptly. “Are you a potion-crafter?”

Her brows furrow. “No.”

She could be lying. The muffin might have contained a love potion. I was a fool to accept food from a stranger—a human. Elves may be tricksters, but humans are downright treacherous.

A love potion or an attraction charm would explain the way I’ve been feeling about her—the way I was compelled to follow her to the palace. It would explain why I’m breaking my usual patterns, behaving irrationally, and obsessing over what it would be like to fuck this girl.

“I’m going to get food,” I tell her in clipped tones. “I’ll have to say it’s for you and bring it back here. Don’t let anyone know that we’re already done with the task, understand? Don’t call out to the guards or speak to anyone.”

“I offended you somehow,” she says forlornly. “I’m sorry. I’m grateful, believe me.”

“This wasn’t a favor,” I reply. “You paid for it with the necklace.”

“The necklace was used up by the spell... so what did you get out of it? Nothing.” A tentative smile plays across her lips. “Face it, you were being kind and generous.”

“Doesn’t sound like me.” I open the door a crack and cast a sight-veil for a few seconds so the guard halfway down the hall won’t see me emerge from the cell. I slip back into the hall, press my palm to the round mirror on the door, and vanish my doppelganger. I’ll be able to activate the mirror again as many times as necessary until it cracks at midnight.

The veil falls from the guard’s sight a moment later, and I stride past him, with a muttered explanation that I’m off to fetch food for the King’s concubine.

The word *concubine* lingers sourly on my tongue and spawns a vision of the big, brutal King prying Juliette’s thighs apart with both his coarse hands—shoving his dick inside her, rutting hard while she winces with pain.

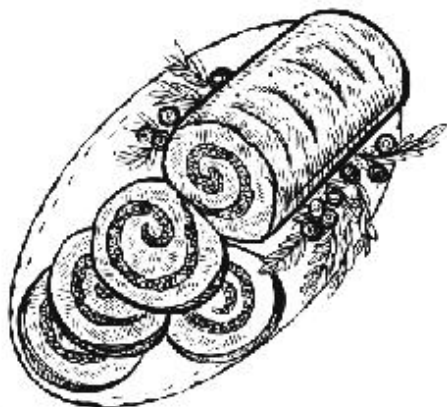
Hot rage boils in my chest, in my head.

That will not happen. I will die first.

But once the King sees the roomful of gold, he’s bound to want to test Juliette’s other attributes. He’ll call her to bed tomorrow night, I have no doubt.

Which means I need to begin thinking of a way to stop that from happening... or if I can’t stop it, at least to ensure that Juliette isn’t forced to submit to attentions she doesn’t want.

It’ll be a challenge. But this is the sort of challenge I like... helping a gorgeous woman, and putting an asshole in his place.



JULIETTE

The spindle stands bare and silent, all traces of light and magic gone.

Instead of the piles of straw, bobbins stand in neat rows, laden with precious metal. When I pick up a bobbin and try to unwind its contents, I can't. The malleable thread solidified once it was wound around the bobbins, creating a shining lump of gold.

"Straw into gold," I murmur in wonder.

I'm not sure exactly what time it is, but I have a feeling we worked for several hours. I desperately need to use the privy, but Rupert told me not to contact any of the guards until he got back, so I wait. By the time he returns with a covered cart of food, I'm doing a little dance of desperation.

"Privy, now," I tell him, and I push past the cart into the hallway.

Rupert shoves the cart the rest of the way into the room and closes the door swiftly so the guard down the hall can't see inside.

He hustles me along, around the corner, and into a long, narrow room. There's a trough with pipes and spigots branching over it... no toilets that I can see.

"What's this?" I exclaim.

"The guards' privy."

"Where are the toilets?"

"There's a peeing trough right there, which also serves as a sink."

I cringe with horror. "But the female guards—surely they don't have to use *this*."

"I'm sure they do. I imagine they stand astride the corner of the trough and aim."

"But what if someone has to—do something other than piss?"

He shrugs. "They sit on the edge, I suppose."

"This is barbaric."

"It's the prison level, sweetheart. Did you expect the facilities to be elegant?"

My hands curl into fists. "It's not just that. It's the way the King is treating us... treating *me*. A fine gown when I appear before him, and yet I'm expected to relieve myself under these conditions? A lovely bedroom, and yet I'm stripped down, scrubbed, and shaved with no regard for my preferences or modesty?"

Rupert gives me a long look, his blue eyes glowing unnaturally bright. "To him, you girls are weapons, tools, pleasure toys, and breeders."

"Exactly. It's horrible."

"You should piss now. I want to get back to the food and eat while it's still hot."

I glare at him. "Do you intend to stand there and watch?"

"I thought I could hold your skirts and petticoats out of the way for you." He smirks.

“How thoughtful, but no,” I say acidly. “I can manage just fine.”

“Suit yourself.” He steps up to the trough and unbuttons his pants.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I exclaim.

He looks up, a feigned innocence in his gaze. “I have to go, too. We can both use it.”

“Not at the same time,” I gasp.

“Why not?”

I try to explain, but words won’t leave my mouth.

And I could turn around. But I don’t. I stand there while he takes out his long, thick cock and pisses into the trough. I watch everything—the stream of liquid, the way he shakes it a little afterward, his fingers refastening the buttons.

I’m not even sure why I don’t look away. Or why my skin is hot as molten gold.

When he’s done, he saunters past me. “I’ll watch the door and stop anyone from coming in. Hurry up.”

Stop gawking, Juliette. Stop it right this minute.

Managing my skirts and using the trough without making a mess is difficult, but I manage to do my business and rinse off. There’s nothing to dry myself with afterward, but I can handle a little dampness. If I’m honest, I’ve been rather damp since I first saw Rupert this morning.

To his credit, he keeps his back turned until I approach and tug on his sleeve. Then he glances at me, a strange look on his face. “All done?”

“Yes.”

He shoves the door open for me, and he nods to both of the guards on our way back to the spinning room. He murmurs something under his breath, presses a palm over the mirror on the outside of the door, and then follows me inside, shutting the door behind us.

“It’s nearly dinnertime,” he tells me, removing the cover from the food cart. “I can’t believe I did a full day’s work.” He scoops a clump of walnut-and-cranberry stuffing from a bowl with his fingers and plops it into his mouth, followed by a steaming strip of roast turkey. “Goddess, that’s good.”

“There’s such a thing as utensils,” I remind him, taking a spoon from the tray and digging into the pudding.

I’ve always had a hearty appetite, but watching him eat is a revelation. It’s hilarious how fast he devours the contents of the food cart—roast fowl and stuffing, vanilla pudding flecked with cinnamon, steaming buttered noodles, fluffy bread dipped in savory sauces, fat vegetable dumplings.

“Such variety in the food of this kingdom,” mumbles Rupert through a mouthful.

“The cuisine of our kingdom is an amalgam of various dishes and spice families, adopted and blended from the surrounding nations.” I survey the puckered, glossy surface of the warm dumpling between my fingers. “Come to think of it, our music is the same way—bits of different styles intermingled to create something new. I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or not. Sometimes I feel as though we’re scavengers, unable to make the creative kill ourselves, instead picking bits off others.”

Rupert chuckles. “I know many Elves who would claim that sort of cultural theft is a typical failing of your race. You stole from us before you stole from each other. That’s what they’d say.”

“And what do you say?”

He chews thoughtfully, swallows. “I’d say that if I like a thing, I don’t much care where it comes from.”

“I suppose I’m the same way. I can appreciate the original sources of food, music, or art, but I tend to prefer it in its current form the most, even if that form has deviated from the original. But is my preference simply because I haven’t had enough exposure to the pure source, the original style or flavor? Maybe I just don’t know what I’m missing. Maybe I’m being lazy, taking what I can easily get and not seeking out the real, vibrant roots of a thing.”

Rupert stares at me quizzically. “You think too much.”

“Other people don’t think enough.”

He laughs. “You’re probably right.”

For the next little while, he devotes himself to ensuring that every platter and bowl is clean, and then he looks at me. “Delicious as that was, none of it compares to the taste of your muffin.”

I know what he means—the lemon-blueberry muffin I gave him when he begged me for food by the fountain. But there’s a significant, salacious twinkle in his eyes that suggests a lewd interpretation of the phrase.

Bending my head so my hair falls across my flushed cheeks, I busy myself stacking all the dishes neatly. “You should take this back. Did you get it from the palace kitchen or the kitchen in the House of Bounty?”

“From the House.”

“Well... you should return everything so it can be washed before the gravy and the leftover bits harden. It’s so much harder to get things clean once that happens.”

A half-laugh, half-scoff bursts from his lips. “Your fate hangs in the balance, and you’re concerned about the servants who wash the pots?”

I meet his mocking blue gaze and say simply, “Yes.”

Surprise flares in his eyes—surprise and a flicker of admiration. “Well then. Let us spare the scullery maids the extra effort of scrubbing away hardened crusts of food.” He takes the handle of the cart and rolls it toward the door.

It rushes over me in a flash—the fact that it’s evening now, and that I’ll be alone in this room during all the long hours of the night, with nowhere to sleep except the hard floor... with nothing to do except toss and turn, worry and wonder.

And suddenly I feel that all the hope, joy, and light that I have in the world is condensed into the broad form of the blue-eyed Half-Elf who shouldered his way into my life. We built a camaraderie between us today, a strange partnership fueled by mutual work and common purpose. He’s my tether to the

outside, my only route to a future beyond “King’s concubine.” More than that—in this moment, he’s someone I need desperately, like a child needs a cozy blanket or a favorite toy. Facing the empty night without him seems violently impossible—unbearably horrible.

“Wait!” I choke out.

He turns, eyebrows lifted.

I swallow, twisting my father’s ring around on my finger. “Are you coming back?”

“Someone has to stand watch outside your door tonight.”

“Yes, but... are you coming *back*?”

Smug satisfaction warms his gaze. “Well, aren’t you needy tonight. Could it be you’ve grown fond of my company?”

“Of course not,” I say hastily. “I just... wanted to know so I could... be prepared.”

“Prepared?”

“To fend off your unwanted advances again, if need be.”

His expression cools. “Ah. You need not worry about that. I’ll remain on the other side of the door.”

Shit... why am I so shy around him? I can usually say what I want, right out loud... but with him it’s more difficult. I’m afraid he’ll mock me, or reject me. I’m afraid of myself for wanting him with me tonight. I’m afraid of the King, of the future—so much fear, and it’s suffocating me.

His hand is on the door, about to push it open.

“I need you,” I blurt out.

Rupert freezes. His back is toward me now, so I can’t see his face, but I note the tensing of his shoulders.

“I mean... I want you here, with me, tonight. If you... if you could... if you don’t mind, I... I can’t handle being alone. I need a little... comfort.”

His voice sounds hollow and strange. “I’m not the comforting kind. Distraction and pleasure I could offer, but

comfort... I've received none in my own life, and I have no practice giving it to others."

"Comfort or not, I just need you." The words fall naked and vulnerable from my lips. "I know we're strangers. By the goddess... I don't even know your real name, but... please, when you're done delivering that... please come back. Come inside." I hear the double-entendre as I say it, but I don't care. I mean it any way he wants to interpret it.

Without turning around or speaking, Rupert opens the door and shoves the cart out into the hallway. The door swings shut behind him, and the key the guard gave him turns in the lock.

I wait a while for him, thinking about all the ways he might have interpreted my impulsive speech, and about all the things he might want to do with me when he comes back.

I sniff my armpits. I smell decent, despite the exertion of the day. Thankfully the room is chilly enough that I didn't work up much of a sweat. And I'm still smooth everywhere thanks to the thorough shave I got when I first arrived.

The pins came out of my hair hours ago, while Rupert and I were working, but I don't mind that. There's no mirror where I can check my face. I probably still have vestiges of the cosmetics my maid applied this morning.

Why am I fluttering and worrying over my appearance? Rupert is clearly attracted to me, despite any dishevelment. He has dropped several bold hints that he'd like to sleep with me.

I wait eagerly, imagining all the ways this night could go. Maybe we'll sit and talk for hours, learning everything about each other. Maybe we'll forgo the words and leap into each other's arms instantly. We'll have to be careful, of course—we can't be caught rolling about naked, especially since I'm one of the King's concubines. But I'm sure a Half-Elf will have some magic to seal the door, or to warn us if someone approaches. Besides, with his doppelganger in place, no one would have reason to suspect anything amiss in the room.

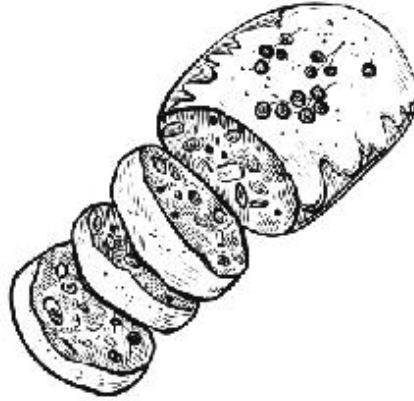
Time passes... I'm not sure how much time. There's no clock or hourglass to be seen, so I decide to track the passing

seconds myself. I pace the room, counting to sixty in a slow, steady rhythm.

I count to sixty over and over, until I've done it sixty times. I use bobbins to keep track of every ten-minute segment.

Once I've counted a full hour again, I slump disconsolately to the floor while my excitement fades to disappointment.

He's not coming back. Maybe something happened to prevent his return, or maybe he decided he didn't want me. Either way, I might as well steel myself for spending the night alone.



THE TRICKSTER

As I roll the cart back into the kitchen of the House of Bounty, a red-faced woman approaches me, her plump fists on her hips.

“Rupert Diggs,” she says loudly over the din and bustle of the kitchen. “Where’s that orlinspice I asked you to fetch last night?”

“Orlinspice,” I falter. “I suppose I forgot to buy it.”

“Forgot, did you? And where’s the coin I gave you for it? Did you *forget* that too?”

Shit. Quickly I tap into my link with the real Rupert and dig through his recent memories, hunting for this woman’s face.

But I’m not fast enough.

“Stealing my coin and failing to deliver, eh?” she huffs. “And I thought we were friends.”

“We are. I’m good for it, I swear. I’ll fetch the coin for you right now.”

“I’ll come with you,” she says. “I’m through with my shift anyway.” She wipes her hands on a towel and whips off her

apron.

Wonderful. Now I'll be delayed on my way back to Juliette.

I fight to keep smiling, to conceal my frustration. "Come on, then. Let's get you your money."

I remember where Rupert's room is, but my mind is divided in two—one part trying to navigate through the House, the other searching Rupert's mind for this woman's name. She's chatty, unlike the other servants I've encountered in the house. I suspect some of the maids are mute by the King's cruelty, rather than by choice, but I haven't had time to confirm that suspicion.

"I'm surprised at you, Rupert," says the cook in a more subdued tone as we traverse the halls together. "After everything we talked about... and then you behave like *this*? You barely looked at me earlier when you came to fetch the food, didn't deliver what you promised, and now you're acting..." She shakes her head. "You're not yourself."

Frantically I scrabble through Rupert's head. Why are his memories of this woman so difficult to find? The surface memories of a stasis sleeper are easy to access, but the more important and emotional memories are usually buried deeper, closer to the soul. Which means this cook is someone significant to the original Rupert. He has her buried beneath layers of everyday encounters and tasks.

"I've been feeling odd lately," I say, to buy myself a few extra moments.

"What we discussed—I know it's a heavy matter," she says in a low tone. "I understand if you're scared. But don't let fear stand in the way, Rupert. Don't tell me I was wrong to put my faith in you. It's not just my life on the line if you change your mind. If you plan to betray us, at least give me some warning, I beg you."

Shit, shit, shit. This goes deeper than I thought. There are secrets between this woman and Rupert—smuggling or rule-breaking at minimum—maybe even conspiracy or rebellion.

"I'm scared, but I'm no traitor." It feels like the right thing to say.

The woman's round shoulders relax a bit. She reminds me of Juliette, except she's significantly shorter. Juliette is tall for a human woman—built for beauty and power...

No, I can't get distracted by thoughts of *her*. I need to figure out what's going on before we reach my room. I have a feeling the cook plans to speak even more freely once we're behind closed doors.

Veering my mental energy back to Rupert Diggs, I delve into his subconscious again, deeper this time. I can see the woman's face—I can almost grasp her name—

But a shudder comes through the link between me and the original Rupert. A vibration of alarm—the kind of disoriented dread that seizes the heart in the moments between sleeping and waking.

He's stirring, breaking out of the stasis slumber.

Fuck me.

I reach into my vest and touch the little jar with the spell ingredients. I dare not mutter a reinforcement spell aloud, but I *think* it with all the force of my will.

Another tremor along the link.

This isn't working. I need to be closer to him. When I'm nearer, I'll have clearer access to his memories *and* I can shove him back down into sleep.

We're at my chamber now. Well... Rupert's chamber. I shoulder my way in first, glancing around to ensure that I didn't accidentally leave any spell ingredients or telltale objects lying about. I've spent little time here since I arrived, so thankfully it's more or less the way Rupert left it.

I reach under the mattress for the coin purse and hand it to the cook. "Take what I owe you."

"You know it's not really about the money," she says. "So you weren't able to get the fennisley? You assured me you could. Were you unable to meet the supplier?"

Fennisley? That's a rare and virulent plant which produces one of the only poisons compatible with magic. With the right Elvish spell, fennisley can be spelled to affect only one person.

Anyone else can absorb or ingest it without harmful effects, while it remains lethal to the intended target.

Finally, some information I can work with.

“Things got complicated,” I tell her. “I need a little more time.”

The cook eyes me, concern in her dark eyes. “You’re worrying me, Rupert. It’s not like you to be so vague.”

“Then I’ll speak plainly. The supplier demanded a higher price. I was putting you off while I tried to think of a way to make up the difference myself.”

“Sweet lad.” The cook pats my arm. “But we’re all in this together, son. You shouldn’t have to bear the burden or the risk alone. I’ll talk to the others and see if we can scrounge up more coin. How much do we need?”

“I’d rather not say,” I hedge. “I’m going to speak with my supplier again and see if I can get the price lowered. Meanwhile, you see what you can get from the others. If they can’t spare any more coin, we may need to steal it.”

“Which would add more risk to the situation.”

“But the end goal is worth it, wouldn’t you say?”

She looks up at me, her lips pressed firmly together, and she nods. “Aye, that it is. Freedom for us all. Especially for the poor concubines of his late Majesty, and the gents like you, whose manhood the King stole. And those poor girls they brought in to be raped and ruined.” Her voice breaks. “This plan must succeed. This must end.”

So my suspicion was correct—they plan to poison the King. With fennisley, the King’s royal taster, the one who checks his food for poison, will be of no use.

But to use fennisley properly, they need an Elf to enchant it. Do the real Rupert and his conspirators know that? Do they have access to an Elf who can perform the spell? If so, I must be careful, since another of my kind may be wandering around the palace in disguise. And if they don’t understand the requirements of using fennisley, they are already doomed to failure.

I need to return to Rupert Diggs and explore his memories on the topic. I must keep him subdued as well... Judging by the increasing force of the vibrations through our mental link, he'll be fully awake in less than an hour.

"I must go," I tell the cook. "As you know, I've been charged with monitoring the needs of one of the new concubines. We'll talk more soon."

She seems to accept the excuse, but there's a twinge of suspicion in her eyes. Whatever trust she may have had in Rupert has been shaken by tonight's encounter. I blundered into an assassination plot—one I heartily support, if it means Juliette's freedom. But I appear to have derailed the effort. If I can get the plan back on track, maybe I can save the pretty baker after all.

Unfortunately, saving her means I will have to disappoint her tonight. She'll be disappointed... perhaps angry... or sad.

I fret over Juliette's reaction as the cook departs, and I fret as I don a cloak, leave the House of Bounty, cross the courtyard, and pass through the gates. Despite the late hour, no one questions my purpose or destination. Either the gate guards are careless or they're friendly to Rupert. I suspect the latter, judging by my previous interactions with them.

The walk to the alley where I left Rupert feels longer than I remember, perhaps because I'm anxious that he will wake before I reach him. The tremors coming from his mind are more frequent now, and I quicken my pace, my gut tightening with apprehension.

I haven't been this worried about anything in ages. It's uncomfortable, and oddly exciting. Perhaps anxiety goes hand-in-hand with every goal worth pursuing. When you want a thing badly enough, the terror of failure is greater, and so is the stress of the pursuit.

I've always viewed stress as an enemy, and I've thought of worry as something to be avoided at all costs. I prefer to drift aimlessly through life, wanting little, needing little, satisfied with little.

But ever since Juliette, I want more. It started with a craving for her body, and progressed to a liking for her company, and now I'm trying to cope with the fierce desire to ensure her safety and to destroy anyone who might threaten it.

And all this in the span of two days.

I should run now. Leave it all behind me. I should let Rupert Diggs wake up and break out of his box—I should let him return to his life. I should leave Juliette to muddle her way out of her dilemma as best she can.

Why should I interfere any further in human affairs, in the schemes and plots of the palace? Why should I risk myself any more for a woman I barely know? Why should I *care*?

At the mouth of the alley, I hesitate. I can see through the spell I placed—I can perceive the box where Rupert lies, invisible to anyone else.

Juliette was right to question me about my motives. *Why are you helping me?* she asked, and I had no good answer, because the only answer makes no sense. *Because I want to. Because you draw me in, fascinate me, compel me to pursue you.*

My connection to her has no logic and no future. It would be better to break it now.

I can do this. I can walk away, before I invest any more in this. Before I get mixed up in a plot to kill the King. Before I sink so deep inside Juliette that I can never separate myself from her again.

This is the moment to run.

So I'll go. I've helped her enough—she may gain the crown based solely on the miracle I worked for her today. She can tell the King it's a feat she can't replicate often, and he'll keep her alive and well just in case she might perform it for him again someday.

I don't quite believe my own rationalizations, but they're enough to propel me past the entrance to the alley and down the street.

Rupert Diggs will waken in moments. By then I'll be on the main road leading out of Giltos, and by this time tomorrow I'll be far away in some hamlet bordering the woods. I'll be back to the familiar life of begging, thieving, and glorious mischief. I'll steal a bottle of good ale, and I'll fuck someone else to get Juliette out of my head. It might take me a while to erase her scent and her face from my mind, but I have time. I'm a Half-Elf, and my life will be long.

I'm walking away, taking off the vest, when I feel the weight of something squarish inside it. Juliette's notebook.

Pausing under a streetlamp, I tug out the small volume and open it. I'm not sure why. Idle curiosity, perhaps.

I opened it to the middle, to a spot she apparently references often. There's a list, with a heading which reads, "Things I want to accomplish."

-replace the roof of the house in the next two years

-replace the pavers for the front walk

-persuade Lady Adebi to try my cream puffs, gain her as a regular client

-rebuild the oven, maybe add a second one

-convince Prain to become more involved in the business, or make him to take up a trade

-invest in a bigger stone for Ma and Pa's gravesite, one with clearer engraving

-win the regional baker's competition next fall

-buy a pair of heeled shoes with pink ribbons

-hire more help, expand deliveries to local inns and shops

-open my own bakehouse

-buy a silk dress

-marry a good man

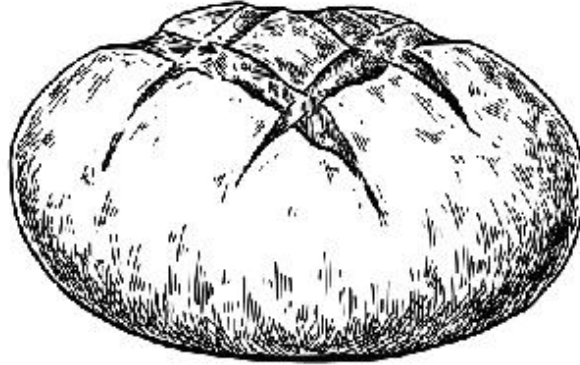
-5 children: Adelaide, Tulane, Darrick, Emmeline, Zeverin

There are a few more items, small practical things scribbled into the margins—but I read the main list three times.

It makes me smile even as it incites a sharp pang through my heart. It's the sweetest, most admirable, most nonsensical list I've ever read. Her character shines through the words—her determined entrepreneurial spirit *and* her yearning for a pleasant family life with a few pretty things. It's all *her*.

I've never had a single goal in my life, unless you count the occasional prank, usually conceived and accomplished within the same day—sometimes within the same hour. This woman is so full of charm, energy, purpose, and kindness I can hardly believe she's real. She's like a glowing fireplace in a cozy room, and the farther I get from her the more I feel the chill of the world seeping into my bones. I want to go back, to linger in her warmth, her light—to huddle near her like a frostbitten traveler.

“Well... fuck,” I murmur, tucking the notebook back into the pocket and donning the vest again. I turn on my heel and jog back toward the alley where Rupert Diggs lies concealed, on the verge of waking.



JULIETTE

I sleep fitfully and uncomfortably on the stone floor. Eventually I give up and resume pacing, wondering where Rupert went. I'm angry with myself for propositioning him, for being vulnerable and letting him know that I craved his company. He obviously did not feel the same way.

Or maybe he was discovered and captured. He's a Half-Elf in disguise, after all—disguised so he could slip into the House of Bounty and look for *me*. Every time I feel angry and humiliated, I keep coming back to that fact.

He followed me here. He intervened in this task and spent his magic to save me.

Either he is a fickle, mischievous Elf and changed his mind about me, or something happened to prevent him from returning.

Despite my disappointment and the soreness of my heart, I decide to give him the benefit of the doubt. I won't hate him—not yet. I'll assume that he fully intended to return, and that he had no choice about staying away. Which makes me worry about him, of course—but concern is better than resentment.

Feeding my anger before I've heard the whole story is a foolish course of action.

Instead, I focus on making a plan, crafting the words I'll say when the King or his emissaries arrive to view the results of my "magic." I've concocted many persuasive speeches over the years, words designed to convince or cajole the tradesmen, laborers, innkeepers, merchants, farmers, and shop owners I've dealt with in the course of business. The King, though far more powerful, is just another man, and the key to dealing with a man is to discern what he wants or needs, and then show him how you can satisfy those wants, fulfill those needs. Identify the point of pain, and show that you can soothe it.

Besides that, presentation matters. So I upend the crates that once held the bobbins, arranging them like shelves or display stands in a semi-circle around the spinning wheel. Then I stack the spools of spun gold on top of the crates, so they will show to the best advantage. I even change the angle of the lanterns to shine the light more directly toward the gold.

Next I finger-comb my hair and replace some of the pins. I sweep my fingers under my eyes to clear any smudged makeup, and I smooth the skirts of my gown, plucking off any remaining bits of straw.

By the time the key turns in the lock, I'm ready.

Two guards enter first, then an elderly man and a middle-aged woman in rich clothing. I don't recognize either of them, but they must be important.

They all step respectfully aside, and the King himself enters the room. His lip is curled, as if he hates having to set foot in this part of the castle—but his expression swiftly changes when he sees the gold.

"By my cock," he says. "So it's true."

He picks up one of the bobbins, hefts it, then hands it to the old man. "There you are, Benoit—what do you think of that?"

Benoit wedges a monocle into place and inspects the gold. "It's real, Sire."

“Fuck me,” says the King. “Kessalif, you are my expert in magic. What do you make of this?”

I watch the woman with renewed interest. This is Lady Kessalif, the most powerful sorceress in DARTHAGE. She doesn't look like the portraits I've seen of her—she's thicker in person, big-boned, and her black hair has more gray in it. There's a regal grace to her presence, a true majesty the King will never possess.

She scans the room, then points to the door. “There are no exits besides this one?”

“None, my lady,” says one of the guards.

“And the straw—it was brought here directly from the fields?”

“From farmlands just outside Giltos, my lady.” The guard bows.

Lady Kessalif turns her incisive gaze on me. Despite the fine wrinkles around her eyes, they are like bright, polished steel.

I meet her eyes, keeping my gaze as open and clear as I can. I can't remember if she has the power to discern a lie or not.

“You performed this task, girl?” she demands.

“I helped,” I say. “The magic did the rest.”

Her eyes narrow a fraction, as if she senses the evasion in my answer. But she only nods and says to the King, “This one is a worthy candidate, Sire. An asset to the Crown.”

“Yes, she has numerous worthy assets.” The King's mouth stretches into a leer as he ogles my breasts. “Very good. You have pleased me, child. You'll perform this magic again as soon as possible.”

“Begging Your Majesty's pardon.” I dip into a curtsy. “I cannot do this magic often. If I could, my family would have accumulated much wealth.”

“How often can you perform this?” The King isn't smiling now.

“Once a year. It takes months for my energy to recharge after such a dramatic act of transformation.”

“Once a fucking year?” The King’s bellow startles me, and the monocled Benoit nearly jumps out of his skin. “Perhaps what you lack is not energy, girl, but the proper motivation.”

“I assure you, Sire—”

“Silence! Benoit, have this treasure thoroughly inspected and stowed in the treasury. You, guards—take the concubine back to her room. I’ve already chosen my entertainment for this evening, but tell Lady Reese to send her to my chambers tomorrow night. Once I see how she rides, I’ll think about how we can motivate her to greater productivity for her King.”

He sweeps out of the room without glancing at me.

As the guards come forward to escort me, I glance at Lady Kessalif—a wordless appeal, woman to woman. In Rupert’s absence, she might be the only one who can help me.

But she only averts her eyes and glides out of the room.

I cannot fathom how she can watch while the King treats other women this way—not when she has the ability to wield magic. She could stop him if she wanted to. So why doesn’t she?

Whatever her motives may be, it’s clear she won’t interfere with the King’s command. So I’m on my own again.

I watch for Rupert as I’m returned to the House of Bounty and hustled through its hallways, but I don’t see him. Where could he be? Is he alright? Maybe someone figured out his true identity and they’re torturing him... goddess, that’s an awful thought.

“There will be a communal breakfast for the concubines this morning,” says one of the guards as they usher me into my bedroom. “Your maid will prepare you for it.”

As the door closes, I glance at the peacock clock. It’s very early in the morning—a couple hours after dawn. The King must have been very eager to see the result of my labor, to bestir himself so early.

My bedroom door opens again, and my stomach flips over, my insides thrilling—but it isn't Rupert. I didn't really think it would be him, but my stupid body reacted anyway. Silly of me.

Instead, it's my maid, the one who prepared me for the audience with the King.

"I'm back!" I assume the best smile I can manage, given my weariness. "Not dead yet."

Her mouth twitches like she's about to smile.

"Apparently I have to attend breakfast with the other concubines," I say. "While you help me prepare, we can go over some of the letters in Elvensign."

She nods, and I teach her the first ten letters while she helps me wash up, braids my hair, and presents me with the outfit I've been assigned for the day. It's a cream-colored dress with lavender-and-gold embroidery, and I like it even better than the dress I wore to court.

As she's changing out my earrings, the maid touches my neck and looks at me quizzically.

"Oh... my mother's necklace." I touch the spot where the pendant used to lie against my skin. "I—I lost it."

The maid gives me a look of rueful sympathy.

"It's alright. Let's go over the letters one more time! Hopefully soon you'll be able to spell your name for me."

She shrugs, her mouth tightening. The meaning is clear—her name doesn't matter.

"I like to know my friends' names," I tell her gently. "Thank you for your help today."

Her expression softens, and with careful fingers she signs four letters. B-E-D-E.

"Bede," I say. "That's your name?"

With a confirming dip of her head, she glides out of the room. There's a quiet grace in her movements, too—the elegance of someone bred for a life of nobility and wealth. But it's more than that, in her case. There's a palpable strength about

her—a spirit the palace hasn't managed to snuff out yet, despite years of mistreatment.

Less than half an hour later, I'm summoned for breakfast. A silent manservant escorts me to an immense dining room furnished with a U-shaped table that can seat at least three dozen people, from what I can tell. There are smaller circular tables along one end of the room, and more tables outside on the terrace. A soft breeze skims through tall doors that stand open to the gardens, and the room shimmers with the pure golden light of morning.

Many of the concubines are already seated, but more enter at the same time I do. A few stride in boldly, heads held high—others sidle in with nervous glances and take their seats quickly, as if eager to escape notice.

I spot Shenya and make my way to an empty seat near her. She's talking animatedly to another concubine on her right, but she keeps stealing glances across the table at Nerith, the young noblewoman with the lavender hair and the scarlet eyes. It doesn't take me long to notice that whenever Shenya looks away, Nerith glances in her direction.

I've seen plenty of couples in the early stages of attraction, right before it blooms into romance. I like to think I've encouraged several successful connections by providing one or both parties with delicious gifts to offer the other. Watching two people sneak longing looks at each other when they aren't flirting or fighting has always delighted me—but here, in this place, it terrifies me, for their sakes. I can't imagine the King looking kindly upon romances between his concubines.

We're served delicate whipped fruit mousse, one poached egg each, and some cold pink fish. I finish my portion quickly and await the next course, but the servants only bring out tea and coffee afterward. With growing horror, I realize that the meal is over. There's no more food.

“Do they want us to starve?” I hiss to Shenya.

She winces and shrugs, adding more sugar to her tea.

At least I had a decent supper yesterday evening, with Rupert. But after all the worrying, the pacing, and the

sleeplessness of the night, I was hoping for a good hearty meal. I *need* real food.

Besides that, my fingers, my brain, and my whole body are beginning to ache for my usual kind of labor—the solid, punchable heft of good biscuit dough, the smooth pour of cake batter, the comforting clatter of my favorite pans tumbling into the sink, ready for a good scrubbing after a job well done. I miss the smell of freshly baked bread, the pop of tiny bubbles in a pancake that’s ready to flip, the feel of rolling a plump ball of cookie dough between my palms.

Baking is my joy and my life. And I may never be able to do it again.

The terrifying realization squeezes my heart so tightly I can barely breathe. I clutch fistfuls of my skirts, crumpling the ivory material, trying to control my panic. I won’t let myself lose control again... not here, not now. I can’t. It will look like weakness. There are other women here who have lost far more than I have—I’m sure some have left behind sweethearts, homes, dreams and plans.

At least I didn’t have a suitor whose heart would be broken by my absence. At least the vanishing of my dreams affects no one but me. At least I still have my tongue, my fingers, and all my parts. At least I made it through the King’s first test.

“Are you alright?” whispers Shenya.

Slowly I unclench my fingers and smooth out my skirts with sweaty palms. “No.”

“I heard they tested you. Did it go badly?”

“No... it went well. Maybe a little too well. I’m supposed to attend the King tomorrow night.”

“He took Alais last night. The tall girl from Zalos?”

I shrug. “I didn’t meet her.”

“That’s right, you weren’t there yesterday when they let us walk in the gardens for an hour. Well, she went to him last night, and she’s not here today.”

“Not here? Do you think they moved her to one of the better rooms? Maybe she dines alone now, in her own parlor.”

“There’s no way to be sure.”

“Unless we ask.” I lift my hand and wave to one of the servants who brought the tea. He approaches warily, and I ask, “Do you know where Alais of Zalos is?”

He swallows, and for a second I think he might be tongueless like my maid—but then he whispers, “She did not please His Majesty.”

Shenya makes a soft, frightened sound.

“What does that mean?” I whisper back.

His next words are barely a breath, so quiet I strain to hear them. “She’s been given to the dark.”

“The dark?”

But he scuttles away without answering.

“Is he saying she’s dead?” I ask.

Shenya shrugs. “No idea.” Her gaze flits across the table to Nerith, who is looking right at her—and during the moment their eyes lock, the tension is palpable.

Across the room, I notice the House steward, Venedict, scanning the tables, surveying all the women. I elbow Shenya before his gaze sweeps over us. When Shenya turns to me, I say quietly, “You have to be more careful about the way you look at each other.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Faint pink colors her cheeks.

“It’s too obvious. You have to hide it better.” I hold up my hand to silence her protest. “Don’t pretend not to understand what I mean. Just... be more careful.”

She blushes deeper. “I know nothing can happen. I just like to look at her. She’s so vivid, so brilliant, with such sharp edges. I want to lean into her and let those edges cut me until I bleed.” Her breath hitches, and she bites her lip. “I probably sound insane.”

“No, not at all. Not to me. I understand how you feel.”

Shenya raises her eyebrows. “You have someone back home?”

“Not exactly. There were men who wanted to marry me, but I never felt drawn to any of them. I did take a couple of them to bed—at different times, of course—and we had a good time, but it wasn’t right. When it happens, I need it to feel right. I need to feel secure, stable, to know that he will stand by me no matter what, help with the business, work alongside—” I stop short as the sickening reality slams into me again.

I won’t ever have that. I won’t find the kind of man I wanted. I can’t marry him and work alongside him at the mill, or in my new bakehouse. I can’t have children with him.

My life is here now. The only man I’ll get to bed is the King—probably not very often, since there are so many of us from which he can choose. The only children I’ll have will be his, and they will belong to the Crown, not to me. They will have *him* for a father—that pompous, cruel, lecherous man, the conqueror and the tyrant. Their inheritance will be stained with innocent blood.

Shenya slides her hand over mine and squeezes lightly, briefly, before letting go. Her eyes are wells of sympathy. She knows why I stopped talking, what I’m thinking.

“We have to make the best of it, somehow,” she murmurs. “Survive, and try to be happy in small ways.”

She has a point, I suppose. But at those words, rebellion flames inside me.

Be happy in small ways...

It’s not enough. Not enough for someone who *wants* as fiercely as I do, someone who has plenty of love to give and wants to receive love in return. This isn’t enough, and it isn’t right—not just for me, but for Shenya and Nerith, and Alais of Zalos, and my maid, and all the others.

This is wrong. It’s wicked. It must end.

The King is the source of it all. He birthed this idea. He thinks he can do anything he likes without rebuke, without consequence. He’s the fly in the batter, the raisin in the dough.

The thing that must be plucked out, or else the whole loaf will be ruined.

What if *I* plucked him out? What if I ended him and his terrible ways?

I don't know who would inherit the crown. King Falron has no heir—there's probably some cousin or other in line for the throne. They can't be any worse than he is.

I'll have access to him. I'll be taken to his room tomorrow night, and we'll be alone... at least I think we will. But I won't be allowed to bring a weapon, and I don't have the physical strength to overpower him—he's a big man, trained as a warrior.

I need to handle this carefully. I'll only have one chance. Maybe this first time he fucks me, I should simply observe—watch for holes in his security, learn his weak points. And then, the next time he summons me to bed, I'll be prepared to strike.

But what if he never calls me to bed again? What if he decides to keep me for my “magic,” and nothing else? I'll have lost my one chance, the one time I had direct access to him, up close and personal. I need to make sure the King has the time of his life tomorrow night. Which means I'll have to ply every sexual talent I have on him, even if it sickens me.

“Juliette?” Shenya taps my arm. The other concubines are rising, being escorted outdoors into the sunshine, while I sit at the table, glowering while I plot the King's death.

I smooth the frown from my forehead and rise with the others, moving toward the terrace.

As I step into the bright gold of the sunshine, I'm momentarily blinded by the flash of light. And for a second I see the spinning wheel turning round and round, magic glittering along its surface, and Rupert's strong hand guiding the gold thread to the bobbin.

I blink, looking away from the sun. But that doesn't help, because the sky is so vividly blue today—as brilliantly blue as a certain Half-Elf's eyes.

Where is he? Dead, fled, or given to the dark?

Will I ever see him again?



THE TRICKSTER

It took me hours to sort through Rupert Diggs' mind and find what I needed while keeping him asleep. My magic was already low, so I had to pause a few times to rest and to get food from a nearby pub before I returned to the alley to delve further into his thoughts.

It's mid-morning before I make it back to the House of Bounty, and by then I'm desperate to see Juliette, to find out what happened between her and the King—how he reacted to the roomful of spun gold.

A few casual inquiries reveal that the girls have just been ushered back to their rooms after breakfast and some time in the gardens, so I make my way to Juliette's room. This time, there are no guards in that hallway, only in the adjoining corridor; but I barely have time to pick the lock before a servant rounds the corner, carrying a stack of towels, and I have to throw a veil over his eyes to keep him from noticing my presence. I dodge into Juliette's room and close the door softly behind me.

When I turn around, she's staring at me. Wearing only a corset, a chemise, and panties. A dress lies over the chair, and a silken set of lounge clothes is draped on the bed.

I've caught her in the middle of changing. Thank the goddess and the earth and the sky for this blessed sight. The cups of the corset barely contain her generous breasts, and her deliciously thick belly and thighs are on full display. My eyes travel upward from those delights to the glorious, glossy curls of her rich brown hair, to the delicate rose of her cheeks, to the swell of her lips, to the dark fringe of her lashes, framing brown eyes that are... ah, they're sparking with anger. I should stop ogling and say something. Anything. *Words, idiot, words...*

"So you decided to show up," she says.

"I apologize. I had to tend to something."

"I assumed as much. I also thought you might be captured, or dead."

"The King would have a hard time capturing, holding, or killing me." I flash her a grin, which she doesn't return. Fuck, she's angrier than I thought she would be. Yet at the same time, the fragrance of her arousal is heavy on the air. Furious as she is, she wants me, even more than she did last night.

"My disguise is dependent on the original Rupert Diggs remaining in a dormant state," I confess. "He was starting to wake up, and I had to deal with that. And I was accosted by someone he's apparently in league with." I lower my voice, stepping nearer to her. Bad idea, because she's breathing heavily, and I'm immediately dazed by the surge and fall of her breasts. "Shit... um, could you put something on?"

"You don't like full-figured women?" She plants both hands on her hips.

"Oh, I like them very much."

She frowns, and I hasten to add, "Not *all* full-figured women... just you. Wait, no—I desire all women, of all shapes... That is to say, I... fuck, you're too beautiful and I can't think straight, so if you have any mercy at all, would you wrap yourself in a blanket or something, because I—"

Juliette smiles, like the sun bursting gloriously through a cloud bank, and she walks straight into my arms.

“Fuck,” I say hoarsely. I was hard the second I saw her, and having all her beauty and sweetness pressed up against me is the most intense and exquisite torture. “I said ‘have mercy,’ you cruel woman.”

“I’m glad you’re alright,” she murmurs against my chest. “And I’m glad you came back. I thought you might have run away. Which would be alright, if you chose to do that—you and I are strangers, and you don’t owe me anything. But I would miss you.”

Cautiously I place one hand over her brown head, holding it against my heart, and I wrap my other arm around her. My next words come out gruff and thick through my tight throat. “I would miss you too. I was afraid the King might have hurt you. How did he react to the gold?”

“Very pleased at first, and then not so pleased when I told him I couldn’t perform such a feat more than once a year. Still... he’s intrigued by the possibilities.” Her tone is dry, and there’s a note of discomfort and dread in it. “So this man you’re impersonating—he’s in league with someone?”

I note the abrupt change of subject, and the way she stays there, against me, like she needs comfort—or like she’s challenging me to stay focused, to keep talking, in spite of my body’s reaction to her.

I clear my throat and scrape together my fragmented thoughts. I keep my voice low, even though Rupert’s memories taught me that the rooms are soundproof, and I haven’t sensed any listening spells or tokens in her chamber. Still, it seems wise to be cautious when we’re talking of treason.

“One of the cooks, and Rupert Diggs, and some others are plotting to kill the King,” I say, barely above a breath. “Rupert was supposed to purchase fennisley from a contact of his. I had to dig deep into his mind to get the name.”

“Fennisley?”

“It’s a poisonous plant that’s amenable to spellwork. Not all plants are. This one can be spelled by an Elf with a charm that renders it harmless to everyone but the intended target. According to what I read in Rupert’s mind, he and the cook

understood that a spell was required, but they thought a human sorcerer would be able to perform it for them. They didn't realize that only Elves have the kind of magic required to manipulate the fennisley. The idea is to introduce the poison into the King's food. He has a taster who checks the food for poison —”

“And they wanted the food to be harmless to the taster, yet lethal to the King,” Juliette finishes. “But without the right magic, their plot would have failed. It would have killed the taster, and they would have been discovered and executed.”

“Exactly.”

“But you're an Elf. You could perform the spell.”

“Half-Elf, but yes... with a little practice, I think I could do it. I'll have to arrange a meeting with Rupert's contact and get the fennisley from them. It might take a few days to accomplish that—apparently this vendor is the skittish sort. No wonder, since they sell banned magical supplies.”

Juliette's face falls, pain lancing through her eyes. She pulls away from me, chewing her lip.

“What is it?” I ask.

“There's no way we could get the fennisley sooner? Maybe even today?”

“What's the hurry?”

“I'm supposed to serve the King in bed tomorrow night.”

A panicked heat blazes through me, yet I somehow feel ice-cold at the same time. “You won't have to. I'll get you out of here before then.”

She shakes her head. “Don't you see? This isn't just about me anymore. It's about everyone the King mutilates, mistreats, and murders. I didn't realize how bad it was, living in my pleasant village, oblivious to the pain he is causing. I was like a horse wearing blinders—seeing only my own plans and problems, with no thought for anyone else.”

“You're not responsible for the King, or for the way he manages his household—or Darthage, for that matter.”

“But I *am* responsible. We all are, everyone who lives in this kingdom and allows this to happen. He’s only a few years into his reign, Rupert. He’ll get bolder, and worse, the longer people like me allow this to go on. He has so much power already that a simple voice like mine won’t have any effect, even if I could find a way to speak out. The only thing to be done is to remove him. He deserves death, for the crimes he has committed against those in his care.”

I love her like this. She gets so flushed and bright-eyed when she feels strongly about something. I want to kiss her until she can’t breathe.

“He deserves it,” I agree. “And I want to help you destroy him. But I can’t let you go to his bed and suffer at his hands. I can’t let him put his cock inside you—” I grit my teeth so hard that pain shoots through my jaw.

She tilts her head, appraising me. “You want to spare me from harm.”

“Yes.”

“And you... you want me. For yourself.”

“I think I’ve made that clear.” I force the words through my clenched teeth.

She gives me that huge smile of hers again, the one that rips the breath right out of my lungs.

Fuck, I’m weak for this woman. I don’t know what has happened to me... I’ve never fallen like this, never felt like this. I need to pull myself together before I melt into a fucking puddle at her feet.

“Well,” she says brightly, “you can have me.”

Just like that.

I stand there, stunned, my mind gone entirely blank.

Her eyes narrow. “You do know what to do, don’t you? How things work, how they fit together...”

There’s a sparkle of mischief in her gaze, and it brings me out of my stupor. “Yes, I understand how it works,” I say dryly. “But first, I want to you to know that I’m going to get you out of

this tryst with the King. I have an idea—it would be good practice for me, and you would get to bake again. But to make it happen, I need to go find someone. So taking you properly will have to wait... much as I hate the idea of waiting.”

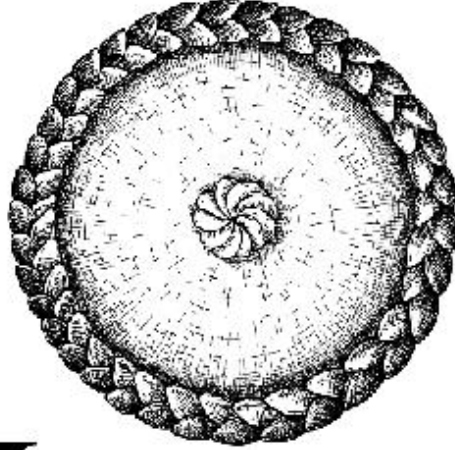
She nods glumly. “I understand.”

But her lower lip pushes out in a plump, sweet pout. I don't think she's doing it consciously—she's reaching for the loungewear on her bed. As she moves, the scent of her arousal floods my nostrils, a tempting cloud of floral notes and rich pheromones.

I dart in, catching her wrist, spinning her around, and lowering her back onto the bed. I catch the waist of her panties and drag them down her legs, pitching them aside. I'm a predator crazed with need, salivating for a taste of sweet flesh. When I shove her thighs apart, her gorgeous pussy is shining, thick and smooth, creamy skin and a delicate, wet pink slit.

“Rupert,” she gasps. “What are you—”

“That’s not my name,” I reply, and then I bury my face in her pussy.



JULIETTE

I grab a pillow and pin it to my face with both arms.

Rupert stops licking me long enough to say, “Don’t suffocate yourself.”

“Mmff,” I answer, opening my legs wider. He takes the hint, and with an eager laugh, he starts lapping my clit again. Then he opens his mouth wide, seals it over my pussy, and begins licking into my center, his tongue dipping deeper with every stroke. He sucks on me—the thick labia, each bit of sensitive skin in between, and my wildly stimulated clit, until I’m fighting not to scream. I can’t say any words beyond “please” and “fuck,” and they both sound the same, muffled by the pillow.

No one has ever eaten me out before. I didn’t know it could feel like this—so incredible and yet so frustrating. I’m dazed with pleasurable sensations, and yet I’m going mad because I can’t reach the peak. I can’t come. I’m straining, focusing hard, working toward the climax, but I can’t seem to get there.

Frustrated and breathless, I toss aside the pillow. “I can’t,” I gasp. “I need to come, and I can’t.”

“You’re ready, then.” He smiles up at me from between my legs, his blue eyes glowing brighter.

“Ready?” I hiss. “Yes, I’m fucking ready. I need this, and if you can’t finish it, I will.”

“Patience, sweetheart.” He mutters something in Elvish—I only know a few words of the language so I don’t understand it at all. It sounds like a rhyme, with a lilting rhythm like the spell he spoke in the room full of straw.

“Poetry?” I groan. “Why are you spouting Elvish poetry when I’m—oh—oh goddess—ahh!” I bite down on the pillow as his tongue touches my clit.

His tongue is vibrating.

That gentle buzz against my clit sends me soaring immediately. I’m flying into space, through time—I’m screaming into my mouthful of pillow, writhing in an agony of bliss while he murmurs, “Come for me, that’s it. Good girl, beautiful girl.”

It’s too much to handle, an ecstasy so keen I can hardly bear it. I think I’m crying. Every bit of me is trembling, turned to jelly by that magical tongue.

He’s kissing my pussy now. No more vibration, just warm lips and an occasional soothing lick while I come down.

“Delicious,” he says, with another long lick over my slit. “So sweet, but there’s a spice to your flavor, too. I can’t get enough. Can you bake me a pie that tastes like your cunt?”

“That,” I gasp, “is the weirdest thing anyone has ever asked me.”

“I’ll take a cookie instead. Or a muffin. Anything with this flavor.”

“How about you just enjoy it from the source whenever you like?” I breathe.

“I could be satisfied with that.” He’s rising on hands and knees, prowling over me, his eyes gleaming. His mouth sinks to mine. “Taste yourself.”

The flavor is strange—sweet and sharp, like he said. It doesn't have the same effect on me that it obviously does on him, but behind my own flavor I can taste *him*. He tastes like blueberries and black tea and autumn wind, the kind of breeze that refreshes your whole body and makes you feel alive.

When he ends the kiss, I lace my fingers behind his head. "Kiss me again."

"We can't be discovered like this," he whispers. "You, with that succulent pussy splayed open to me... it would cause questions."

"It might," I admit.

He reaches down and pets my pussy, letting a finger or two dip inside me.

"That feels so good," I murmur. "No one has ever made me feel this good."

"And no one else can have this little pussy." His expression darkens, and he cups me protectively between the legs. "I swear you will not suffer this violence. I will kill the King myself before I let it happen."

"Could you? Kill him, I mean?"

His features tighten. "Not unless I was under immediate physical threat from him and it was self-defense. There is a law among the Elves—that we do not interfere directly in the politics of humans. Boldly assassinating a human King would certainly draw the attention of the Elders, and they would probably sentence me to death. I will risk that fate if I have to, but I'd rather find another way. Let me speak with a few people and try my plan first. If it doesn't work—"

"If it doesn't work, I'll take the King to bed while thinking of you," I tell him firmly. "I won't let you risk your life over something I can endure. I'll let him fuck me, and then we'll secure the poison and get it into him somehow. Will your people still come after you if you help with obtaining and spelling the fennisley?"

"Not if I can't be connected to the crime." With a final fond sweep of his hand over my pussy, he moves off the bed.

“They’ll only know it’s me if I stride into the King’s chamber and start throwing spells around. If we do this quietly, and I keep my assumed identity intact, I should be safe.”

“Good.” I stand up as well, pulling on my panties first, then the loose, comfortable clothing I’d planned to wear. “I want you safe.”

When he doesn’t reply, I cast a glance at his face—so handsome, with that dark scruff along his jaw, those brilliant blue eyes, and the pointed ears he keeps hidden from everyone but me. There’s a liquid shine to his eyes, a quiver around his mouth that belies his smirk. What I said affected him, I can tell. It’s so cute... it warms my heart right to the core. He’s lonely, and he likes me. He wants someone to care about him. Judging by what he told me of the Elves, he hasn’t had much in the way of family comfort or support. At least I had that once, before my parents passed on. I was too young to fully appreciate it, but I remember it. Unconditional, unselfish love. Comfort and stability. Rupert may not have received those things, but he knows how to give them. He’s given them to me.

“Go,” I tell him, with a smile. “Take care of yourself. And let me know the next step in this plan of yours.”

“I will.” He eases the bedroom door open a crack and checks the hallway before darting out.

I plop back onto the bed, resigned to waiting *again*. But I vow to myself that if I get out of this, I will do less waiting on others. I will give myself power over my own life, as much as possible. Never again will I yield to the selfish choices of a man like my brother, or the King. I will be the goddess of my own destiny, and mistress of my fate.



THE TRICKSTER

It takes me hours to get everything arranged, but with my clever tongue, natural charm, and a little help from the real Rupert's memories, it all falls into place. Rupert barely stirs when I dip into his mind—he's been thoroughly immersed in the charmed sleep again. As long as I don't fiddle around too much in his head, he should stay that way.

Shortly before midnight, I show the permission note I've obtained to the guard monitoring Juliette's hallway, and he lets me into her room.

"Juliette Wetheris," I say stiffly, loudly enough for the guard to hear. "You requested kitchen access to prepare a special treat for your tryst with His Majesty tomorrow night. I'm happy to inform you that your request has been granted. You have two hours. I'm to escort you to the kitchen and supervise you during that time."

Juliette's eyes betray only the faintest flicker of surprise. "I've been longing to bake for His Majesty," she says, with theatrical enthusiasm. "I'm so grateful that my request has been granted."

“Come on, then.”

She’s still wearing the loose pants and silky shirt she put on earlier, and she doesn’t bother to change. I nod to the guard, and he returns the gesture before going back to his post.

I chose to get official permission for this rather than relying on magic. My energy reserves still haven’t quite recovered from the strain of changing so much straw into gold, or from dealing with Rupert Diggs. I must be careful about my use of magic.

As Juliette and I walk through the halls of the House of Bounty, I maintain the bland, stoic expression of a bored servant escorting a concubine. The kitchen is empty when we arrive, but thanks to my new friend the cook—Mistress Moorne, as I now know her—the ovens are still hot, the lamps are still lit, and an array of bowls, spoons, measuring cups, and ingredients are laid out along the huge central table.

Juliette squeals with delight as we enter the enormous kitchen. She stands there for a second, both hands clasped over her mouth.

“Impressed?” I smirk a little, as if I’m solely responsible for the wondrous contents of the room.

“Goddess,” she breathes. “I’ve dreamed of a kitchen like this, but to actually *see* it...”

I close the double doors behind us. They can lock from the outside, but there’s also a bar for the inside, probably a security measure in case the House is invaded by enemies of some kind. There’s dust on the wooden bar—it hasn’t been used in ages, but I blow the dust off and set it in place.

“No one will disturb us,” I say quietly. “You have official permission to use this space for two hours, and I am your assigned supervisor for that time. We can do anything in here.”

“Baking,” she says, with a pointed look. “You said I’m to bake a treat for the King. I’m guessing this is part of your plan?”

“It is. Like I said, I need a little practice with targeted spellwork before I attempt to charm the fennisley. There’s a spell I’ve used before, which may prove useful both for practice and for making tomorrow night more pleasant for you.”

“I’m all ears.”

“I need something on which to place the spell, and it must be crafted by your hands in order to have the best effect. How about muffins?”

“For a King?” She makes an uncertain grimace, then brightens. “Cupcakes! A step up from muffins, and I can make them fancy.”

“Perfect. Tell me what you need.”

“An apron, and then some space.”

“Space?”

“I like to be alone when I’m baking.”

“Not tonight you don’t.”

She smirks. “Is that so? Why don’t you fetch me an apron, and then we’ll see.”

I grab a clean apron from a row of wooden pegs by the door and settle it over her before fastening the ties. I let my hand linger on her hip, then travel down to cup the curve of her ass.

She sucks in a breath. “Stop being naughty.”

“Can’t help it, sweetheart.”

“I need eggs. Make yourself useful and find some.”

Grumbling, I head to the cold cellar and return with the eggs. She’s already measuring flour, humming to herself. I don’t know the song, and I suspect she’s off-key, but her happiness warms my heart so thoroughly that I can’t stop smiling.

“For a while I really thought you had spelled me,” I say, watching her add scoops of sugar to the bowl.

She raises an eyebrow. “But I don’t know any magic.”

“I couldn’t think of any other reason for how strongly I’m drawn to you.”

Her eyes sparkle mischievously, and she tugs her full lower lip with her teeth. “Really? No other reason?”

She’s standing there, so plump and blushing and beautiful, so joyful and bright-eyed and luscious—and I can’t hold back

any longer. My balls are swollen tight with need and my cock is painfully hard—my nipples are pebbled, my blood roaring with lust.

I'm behind her in a second, reaching around her to shove aside the bowl and spoons. There's flour on the table but I push her down onto it anyway, her big breasts smushed against the polished wood. With one hand I hold her there while my other hand rips down the silky lounge pants, baring her bottom. Between the creamy cheeks of her ass I can see the plump lips of her pussy, swollen and wet and ready for me.

She stays bent over the table, ass out, her face aflame and her breath quickening. With one hand, she reaches back and pulls on one cheek of her bottom, opening herself a bit more to me.

Wretchedly desperate, I tear open my pants. I don't waste time on words—this is raw impulse, sheer manic need. Blindly I shove my dick inside her. I'm gifted in both girth and length, and her hole has to stretch to take me, but she's so slippery it's easy to plunge all the way in.

The soft, wet suction of her body gloves my cock, tantalizing every nerve along my length. The stimulation is unbearable, and I almost come right away.

“Shit,” I hiss, tangling my fingers in her hair as I seat myself fully inside her.

“Rupert,” she gasps.

“That's not my name.” I grasp her hip tightly and pull back before surge forward hard, a vicious thrust into her sex.

“Then tell me your real name,” she begs.

“Can't.... gods...” The sensation of my cock rolling through her tight channel is beyond divine. Bolts of heart-stopping pleasure skate up my dick into my belly, and my body tightens, ready to spill everything inside her.

Later I'll fuck her slowly. Right now my need is so great I can think of nothing else, and so I fuck her rough and raw, so hard the heavy table shudders with the power of my thrusts. I

wrap my hand deeper into Juliette's beautiful hair, tugging her head back while I give her sweet pussy a brutal pounding.

She angles her hips a bit, gasping, "The edge of the table—is—in just the right spot—I—I'm almost—fuck me harder, please, please—"

I ramp up the violent pace of my thrusts, grinding her mound against the table. A chill of intense pleasure runs over my body as I feel the first flutters of her orgasm.

"I'm coming," she says jerkily, hoarsely. "Oh goddess... I'm coming, I'm coming, I'm coming—"

She keeps repeating it, and I almost laugh, because I love how I've reduced her beautiful, intelligent brain to a mindless, wanton blur whose single focus is cock.

"Quietly, sweetheart. No screams," I admonish her, and then I feel it—her whole body trembling with the uncontrollable rush of her orgasm. She's whimpering, shaking. Her walls tighten rhythmically around the length of my cock—thrill after thrill and I can't breathe, I'm coming, coming so fucking hard I can barely see. I grip her hair and her hip, bending over the table as my cock shoots stream after stream of thick cum into her womb. My balls keep tightening, and my dick keeps pulsing, spurting, draining everything. My entire body is awash with glistening pleasure, and I can't make a sound beyond a few low, choked moans.

I'm wordless, but Juliette is talking to me, low and sweet. "That's a good boy. That's what you needed, isn't it? You needed somewhere to put all that lovely cum."

I would never have guessed she had such a naughty tongue.

I let out a harsh gasp, and I can breathe again. The sharp ecstasy is softening, ebbing. Slowly I pull out of her, and I watch my thick white cum pool at her entrance and slide down her pussy and drip onto the kitchen's tiled floor.

Juliette twists around and looks down at the floor, worry creasing her pretty face.

"We have to clean that up," she says. "Kitchens need to be kept very clean, you know, so people don't get sick."

“I’ll take care of it.”

“Good. There’s a dish of soap by the sink over there. I’ll find a cloth or something to clean myself up.”

“You’d better burn the cloth or wash it afterward,” I suggest. “Can’t have cum-rags lying around the kitchen. Let me help you with this.” I scoop my fingers through her sex, collecting my cum and her arousal.

Truthfully, I love the filthy, transgressive act we committed. I’d happily smear our blended arousal on every surface of this room and laugh silently, knowing that the kitchen maids and cooks would be working on tables and counters tainted by our release. But Juliette takes kitchen cleanliness seriously, so I’ll play along.

Minutes later, the cleanup is done and the mixing process has resumed. Juliette commands me to be quiet while she works. When the batter is ready, I have her spit into it. Then I uncork a tiny vial from my pocket and tap its contents into the bowl.

“Is that... hair?” Juliette makes a face.

“Two strands of King Falron’s hair, chopped fine,” I tell her. “I offered to carry the King’s laundry down for one of the maids, and she was happy for the help.”

“But how do you know it’s his hair?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Oh, but I do.”

“Fine.” I sigh. “The hairs were the curly kind. I found them inside his undershorts.”

“Oh. Ew.” She looks as if she’s about to gag.

“See? You didn’t want to know.”

Juliette prims up her mouth. “Just... go on and do the spell.”

“I will, after they’re baked. I have to compose the right wording.”

“You use poems every time, but with different words and rhythms,” she comments.

“Elvish magic is built upon rhythm and cadence,” I explain. “The limerick is the simplest spell form, and the most widely used, but Elves with greater power use more complex rhythms for extended or complicated spellwork. Rhyme is important, too—the pairing of sounds.”

“And what will this spell do?”

“It will target the King directly. Anyone else will be able to sample the cupcakes with no effect, but with him, they will produce a kind of delirium, a waking dream. He will believe that he’s having the best sex of his life with you. Meanwhile, you can stand aside and watch him writhe in ecstasy on the bed. You won’t need to be involved at all.”

“And tomorrow he’ll believe that he slept with me?”

“Yes. The details will be a little blurred, but he’ll have that memory.”

“I see what you mean, about this being a similar spell to the one for the fennisley.”

“Far less potent and harmful than the other,” I reply. “Any spell meant to produce death or harm requires much more energy and a more forceful rhyme and rhythm. It’s the goddess’s way of curbing magical power.”

“But you can do it,” Juliette says. “Even as a Half-Elf?”

“You’re doubting me now?”

“No.” She flushes. “Just wanted to be sure.”

The thing is, *I’m* not sure. I think I can do this, but I’ve never worked anything that malevolent before. I’ve heard Elves talk about the toll it takes when one attempts malicious, lethal magic, but I have no first-hand experience, no way of knowing exactly how much the act of casting the spell will drain me.

“I can do it,” I say with forced confidence.

“Of course you can. I’m sorry I said that... I know you’re sensitive about the...” She winces, bites her lip.

“About being a Half-Elf?”

She nods. “If I ever say anything that hurts you, please tell me. I don’t have much experience interacting with Elves of any

kind, much less Half-Elves, and I don't want to be insensitive. You shouldn't have to teach me how to avoid hurting your feelings, but I don't know who else to ask, and I'm sorry in advance if I say anything thoughtless—I'll try not to. I'll do my best to think it through and imagine how I would feel in your situation—”

“Stop.” I catch her hands, a smile softening my worry. She's so fucking cute and sweet. “I'm tough, alright? I can handle it. I've been dealing with what I am for years.”

“What you are is *wonderful*,” she says stoutly. “No one should ever think anything different.”

“I'm flattered. Now we should get these in to bake, yes?”

“Yes! And then I need to make the frosting.”

Once the cupcakes are safely in the oven, she whips up a batch of frosting. She tests it, sticking a spoon in and licking the frothy white sweetness with her pretty pink tongue, which drives me mad. I pluck the spoon from her mouth and replace it with my own lips and tongue. Juliette gives a startled little giggle of surprise which melts into a moan as I cup her firmly between the legs, kneading my palm and the heel of my hand against her sex.

I lick the sugar from the inside of her mouth, then break the kiss to whisper, “Get on the table, sweetheart.”



JULIETTE

I'm lying naked on the kitchen table in the House of Bounty, while Rupert paints the globes of my breasts and the triangle of my pussy with frosting. I'll have to make another batch, but I don't mind—this is worth it.

There's an element of danger in what we're doing. When he fucked me over the table, it was quick, and we both had our clothes on. If anyone tried to get in, we could have quickly rearranged our clothing and unbarred the door.

But we've let it go much too far this time. I'm a naked human cupcake, and if anyone comes to the door while Rupert is enjoying me, there's no way I could clean up and get dressed fast enough to avoid suspicion. We are risking actual harm, maybe even death, and I must be far more twisted than I ever realized, because the danger isn't stealing my sexual appetite—it's making me wetter. I can feel the slickness between my parted thighs, my arousal mingling with the frosting as Rupert daubs the lips of my pussy with creamy, sugary white.

I'm breaking more than just the King's rules—I'm breaking my own rules of kitchen hygiene. That bothers me

more than the risk of discovery, if I'm honest. But I swear to myself we'll clean everything up.

"The best dessert I've ever seen," he groans. "Fuck, I wish I had a painting of you like this. I wish you could see yourself, you gorgeous, delectable woman."

"If you're going to eat me, you'd better do it," I advise. "The cupcakes will be done soon."

He grins and scoops more icing onto the flat paddle he's been using to frost my body. He spreads more icing over my right breast, then pats it lightly so the soft flesh jiggles. Then he leans over the table and places his open mouth right over my nipple, sucking firmly.

The sensation is divine. It's a bolt of tingling delight right through my nipple and straight to my clit, where the sensation of building arousal curls warm in my belly. I'm panting, flushed, fighting the whimper that's rising in my throat. Rupert swipes his tongue along the curve of my breast, devouring the icing and tantalizing my skin at the same time.

The man must have an insatiable appetite for sweets, because he laps all the frosting off both my tits within moments, leaving my breasts wet and my nipples pink and peaked.

Then his forefinger carves a trail through the frosting on my mound, right above my clit.

He offers me his finger, coated with sugar. "Open up, sweetheart."

Obediently I open my lips and let him insert the finger. I suck on it, holding his gaze, watching his blue eyes heat with lust.

With a low growl of desire he dives between my legs, devouring the frosting with long, fierce licks, so firm and rapid that I'm driven to the peak faster than I expected. My fingernails scrape the wooden table as I gasp, rising, rising, nearly there—

A whispered spell, and then his tongue vibrates against my clit, and I clap my hands over my mouth just in time to stifle my scream of ecstasy.

The orgasm is like the flash of fire in a pan, bright and hot, settling quickly into a steady glow.

“Shit,” I whimper as he continues savoring my oversensitive pussy. “Shit, shit. Oh goddess, Rupert—the cupcakes!”

He darts over to retrieve them from the oven, while I sit up, trembling, and stagger naked to the sink, where I dampen a rag and begin wiping the rest of the frosting off my body.

Rupert sets the pan of cupcakes on a sideboard to cool, then comes over to wash his hands at the sink before disappearing in the cold cellar.

Quickly I finish wiping myself down and pull on my clothes. I’ll be a little sticky, but my maid already told me I’d be visiting the baths tomorrow in preparation for my night with the King, so I can endure the faint stickiness until then.

After soaping up another cloth, I wipe down the table, discard the bowl and paddle Rupert used, and set about making a fresh batch of frosting while the cupcakes cool. And all the while I’m smiling—smiling at the warm glow between my legs, the delicious satisfied soreness of my pussy—smiling at the memory of Rupert’s admiring grin as he turn me into his own personal confection.

I’ve never done anything so wicked, so wonderful. The combination of baking and sex is the naughtiest, most perfect blend I could imagine. The only thing that would make it better is—

“Wine,” Rupert says cheerfully, climbing the steps out of the cold cellar.

“Are we allowed? Don’t they keep track of the wine and ale and such?” I ask.

“This bottle had Rupert Diggs’ name on it. I found it at the back of his assigned shelf. Perhaps he was saving it for something—a celebration.”

I frown. “If we drink this, we have to replace it.”

“If you wish.”

“I do wish. It’s bad enough you’re robbing this man of multiple days of his life—and now we’re drinking his precious bottle of wine?”

“He’ll be fine. He’s getting a well-deserved rest after the trauma of his demotion and mutilation.” Rupert yanks the cork out of the wine bottle, and I can’t help noticing how his bicep bulges against his shirt-sleeve when he does it. I’m desperate to see him naked, or at least shirtless. But if I suggest it, he’ll strip down his bare skin right here, and I think it’s best we both remain dressed from this point on. After all, our two hours in the kitchen is drawing to an end. We need to stay focused on our purpose—finishing the cupcakes.

We sip our wine while I frost the cupcakes, batting away Rupert’s hand when he tries to help. “There’s an artistry to a smoothly-frosted, impeccably garnished cupcake,” I tell him. “And your clumsy fingers will only fuck it up.”

“My fingers do like to fuck things up,” he admits, with a squeeze of my rear.

I try to suppress a smile, but I can’t. I’m *happy*. Here, in this wretched House, under the sway of a terrible monarch, far from my home, my business, my friends and my brother—I’m *happy*. It feels so wrong to admit that to myself, but it’s true.

I’ve never experienced anything like this—the sexual play, the constant naughty innuendo, the free use of my body in my sacred space—the kitchen. I could have experienced it with someone eventually, I suppose, if I’d allowed it—but I’ve never felt like allowing anyone this much freedom with my body and my mind. Rupert simply... suits me. He is charming, but with enough clumsiness and uncertainty to be endearing. He’s clever, but not so intelligent that he’s pompous and unbearable. He’s coarse sometimes, and yet respectful of my wishes... earthy yet magical. I’ve never met anyone like him, and every part of his personality fascinates me.

His hand is still stroking my bottom, but his forehead is puckered now, his lips moving as he concocts the rhyme he wants to use. Every warm sweep of his hand over my rear makes me want to pull down my pants, fling myself onto the table, and beg him to use me again. But I restrain myself and

continue placing bits of lemon peel around the blueberries nestled in the cupcake frosting.

“I think I’ve got the right spell,” he says after a few minutes. “And just in time. Our two-hour window is nearly at an end. I think we made rather good use of it, don’t you?”

“Very good use.” I’m blushing again—I can practically feel my chest and cheeks getting heated and splotchy. Someday perhaps I’ll learn to control that reaction.

Rupert chants the spell over the cupcakes, using Elvish words this time. There’s no glimmer of magic, no sign that his words had any effect.

I frown, puckering my lips. “Are you sure it worked?”

“I’m sure.”

“If you’re wrong...”

“I know.”

We both stand there for a moment, staring at the cupcakes. If he’s wrong, I’ll have to fuck the King.

There’s nothing else to say after that. We finish cleaning the kitchen, and then I set the cupcakes neatly on plates and place them inside a box made of stiff brown paper. I tie it up with string, and then Rupert and I head back to my room. The guard unlocks the door for us, and Rupert helps me move over a few peacock figurines and set the box on the dresser.

Fuck... I didn’t ask him how much the King needed to consume before the spell would take effect. A few bites? One whole cupcake? Two? And I can’t ask now, because the guard is standing in the hallway, holding the door, waiting for Rupert to leave so he can lock me in again.

“We made a lot of cupcakes,” I say pointedly, hoping Rupert will perceive the question behind the words. “I may have some left over.”

“I hope His Majesty enjoys them,” he replies.

He didn’t understand my question, and I don’t dare clarify, because the guard clears his throat impatiently.

Our time together is over for tonight. I hope Rupert knows it will be too dangerous for him to try to see me tomorrow while I'm the center of the maids' attention, under the supervision of the matron, Lady Reese. He should spend his time trying to track down the fennisley.

"I'll have a busy day tomorrow, preparing for the King," I comment as he heads for the door.

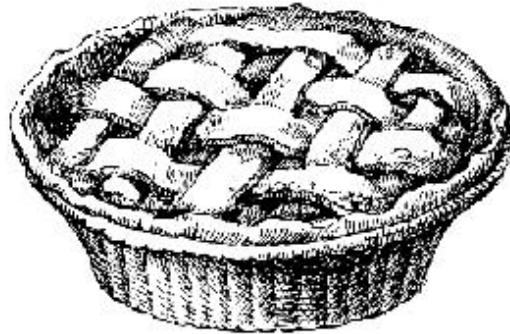
"Such an honor to serve the King," Rupert says tightly. "Goddess be with you."

"And with you."

I wish I'd thought to kiss him once more in the kitchen, but we were so busy tidying the place and packing the cupcakes that I forgot. So I can give him nothing but those three words and a cool little nod. And he has to walk out of the room without a backward glance, as if I am nothing to him—just another royal concubine.

We haven't given a name to the thing between us, the tenuous invisible cord that seems to grow thicker and more solid which each passing hour we spend together. I'm afraid to label the connection. Afraid it will disappear, or worse—be snipped apart by the ruthless shears of the King's will.

I think if that cord was cut, it would drip my heart's lifeblood.



JULIETTE

The next evening, after a day of ablutions and beauty treatments, I stand at the door of the King's chambers, flanked by two guards, with two more bracketing the doorway and others standing a little farther down the hall. In my hands is a box of the charmed cupcakes, already tested and approved by the King's taster, the boy who served as the living table for His Majesty in the audience chamber. After taking a bite of one cupcake and being observed for several minutes, he retreated into a room across the hall from the King's.

I'm not sure what the King's relationship with the boy is. He looks barely eighteen, if that, and by all accounts the King prefers women. But there's something in the boy's manner—the half-jealous, half-pitying way he glances at me, the placement of certain bruises on his half-naked body—I suspect the King takes pleasure with him occasionally. I don't envy the boy his dangerous placement, so near to the cruel and fickle Crown.

Tonight, I'll be the one in the presence of that toxic power, utterly vulnerable to the King's word and whim. With every bit of my body and soul, I hope Rupert laid the right spell on the cupcakes. I hope it works.

But I have a plan if it doesn't. Breathe through the pain, keep my mind on pleasant things, and endure until it's over. Do whatever the King demands, then erase the whole incident from my mind afterward.

I can do this. I *must* do this.

A man opens the double doors to the King's chamber. "You can bring her in now."

The guards on either side of me advance, and I walk forward with them. Ivory silk whispers around my body, clings to the curves of my breasts and belly. I'm entirely smooth, clean, scented with the King's favorite fragrance, and my hair flows in loose waves down my back. My feet are bare, my nails tinted pink, my calluses filed away, and my lips and lashes enhanced with cosmetics.

I am the perfect offering for His Majesty.

When my brother lied, did he know what would happen to me? He must have guessed some of it, surely.

Prain put me in this position. He set in motion the chain of events that brought me here, into this magnificent cavern far too spacious to be called a bedroom. My brother should have realized that I would be forced to pleasure the King in the great silken expanse of his royal bed.

Maybe Prain knew, or maybe not. If I was a gambler, I'd bet money that he was thinking only of his immediate survival, not of the far-reaching consequences of his words.

But thoughtless ignorance is no excuse. Prain did this to me, and I let him do it. I played along out of love, out of loyalty.

But as my gaze centers on the hairy bulk of the naked King, splayed in the center of the bed, my last vestige of love for Prain dies. Shrivels, and disintegrates into powdery ash.

If I met my brother again, if he wept and apologized, I might grant him forgiveness. But I couldn't stir up the love again. New love would have to grow, and that would take time. He would have to cultivate it, and I doubt he'd want to invest the energy.

One of the guards informs the King that the offering I brought has been tested and pronounced safe. The palace staff and security don't seem aware of targeted spells like the ones Rupert described. That kind of magic is apparently rare and obscure, limited to the Elves and little-known among humans, except for a few desperate rebels in the palace.

I approach the King's bed, while the guards retreat into the hall and close the bedroom doors. I sink to my knees as gracefully as I can, still holding the cupcakes.

"What is this?" The King sits up, scratching his naked stomach. His short cock is already thick and prominent, jutting upward with need. I almost smirk at the difference between his statue's generous endowment and the reality, but I manage to control my expression.

"Back home, I was a baker," I tell him. "I would be honored if Your Majesty would taste the delights I've prepared."

"Oh, I'll taste your delights." He chuckles at the double-entendre. "Very well, hand it over."

I thought I might have to persuade him, and I'm relieved I don't. He's a warrior still, but since ascending to the throne, he has apparently leaned into the luxuries of a ruler's life, and his body betrays an increased appetite for rich food. I have the same weakness for delicious treats, the same drive to accomplish my goals, the same love for efficiency that he seems to possess. But I'd like to think our similarities end there.

The King opens the box I handed him, lifts a cupcake, and bites into it. To disguise my anxiety, I decide to try a little flattery. "I've been in awe of the efficiency I see here, both in the palace and in the House of Bounty. Your Majesty is wonderfully skilled in the management of an immeasurably large staff."

"The key to management is delegation," he says through a mouthful of cakey crumbs. "I put the right people in place, and they keep things running smoothly."

"How wise of you! And you're so adept at negotiations and diplomacy." I give him a demure smile. "I've heard the tales of how you convinced Qedron and Messava to become our allies."

“That I did.” He takes another huge bite. “I get what I want. You’d do well to remember that when you’re called upon to create more gold for me.”

I swallow a nervous lump in my throat. “Yes, Sire.”

“Get up, and take that silky thing off. Let me look at you.”

I climb to my feet, trying to keep my face relaxed and pleasant, even as I worry about the cupcakes. Is the spell active? How fast will it work?

Pulling the silk nightgown over my head, I stand nude before the King, fighting the urge to cover myself with my hands.

His eyes glaze over with lecherous delight. “I’ll bet you have a nice juicy cunt,” he says. “I had a dry, bony one last night, so you’ll be a welcome change. Turn around and bend over.”

I draw in a bracing breath and prepare to obey... but as I’m about to turn around, the King gives a low moan and falls backward onto the bed, the last morsel of the cupcake rolling from his hand. His cock is sticking straight up, thick and purple.

“Yes,” he mumbles. “Yes, just like that. Take your King deeper, all the way down your throat... yes, ughh!” With a shuddering jerk, he comes all over himself.

Cautiously I move nearer, peering at his eyes. They’re glazed over with a film of glowing pink light. The spell has taken effect.

Praise be to Rupert.

Quickly I pull my nightgown on again. I move the box of cupcakes to the bedside table, lift the King’s legs, and swing them back onto the bed. Then I brush away the crumbs and rumple the bedding, denting one of the pillows as if my head lay there.

Meanwhile the King trembles, his cock thickening again. He keeps mumbling obscene phrases, so I glean a few hints about the debauched scenes playing out in his mind. He chokes out “Juliette” the second time he comes, and I wince at the perverse sound of my name in his mouth.

He's panting heavily, and his eyes are beginning to clear.

"Have another, my lord," I say, and he munches another cupcake greedily, licking his lips and muttering vulgar things.

Over the next few hours, we work our way through four cupcakes. By the end of it, he's coated with his own cum, he looks wretchedly pale, and his balls appear rather... shriveled. I decide against giving him any more, but I can't very well leave the cupcakes for him to eat at the wrong time, so I decide to give the rest to the guards when I leave.

The King is unconscious now, snoring lightly. In the adjoining lavatory, I soak a cloth in water and return to wipe most of the cum from his skin. He has to think he deposited his loads into me.

With that disgusting task finished, I rumple my hair a bit and pinch my cheeks to make them redder. Then I emerge into the hallway.

"The King is very tired, and very satisfied," I murmur to the guards, with a simpering smile. "He suggested I return to my room in the House of Bounty. And he's had his fill of these cupcakes, so you may partake of the leftovers, if you like."

The guards perk up at the prospect of free nighttime snacks. The spell won't affect them, and they'll clean up all the evidence of any spellwork—very convenient for me.

One of the guards escorts me back to my room, waits for me to turn up the lamp, and then locks me in. The peacock clock on my mantel proclaims that it's two hours after midnight.

Yesterday around this time, Rupert and I were taking the most delicious kind of risks in the House kitchen. Wicked and monstrous as the King is, watching the effect of the spell was a little arousing. He disgusts me as a person, but the idea of coming helplessly and uncontrollably so many times was strangely titillating—and that, coupled with my memories of Rupert from last night, has me feeling warm and melty.

I settle onto my bed, leaning back against the pillows. My fingers curl into my nightgown and drag it up to my waist. I open my legs and slide one hand over my mound, probing for my clit.

“I take it the night went well.”

The voice startles me so badly my heart starts pounding. “Fuck!” I gasp.

Rupert emerges from the privy closet into the soft glow of the lamp. His face is grim, his arms crossed. “So you liked what you saw of the King?”

“I—no!”

He looks pointedly at my hand, still pressed between my legs.

“Oh, *that*—it wasn’t him that turned me on... just the idea of being forced to come like that, over and over, until I couldn’t anymore...”

His expression softens, and his eyes brighten. “That turns you on?”

“Maybe.”

“You want to be utterly helpless, to have someone else control when you orgasm?” He’s stalking nearer, deep-set blue eyes gleaming in the shadow of his dark brows.

“I wouldn’t yield control to just anyone,” I counter. “I would have to trust them completely.”

“Hm.” He reaches down, sweeps his palm up my thigh. “And the King... how did he enjoy his evening?”

“I believe it was everything he hoped for. Are you sure he’ll remember only the visions, not the reality?”

“He’ll remember the fantasy his mind created for him. The spell works with what is already present—your essence and his lust. How many cupcakes did you give him?”

“Four.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Four? At his age? I’m not sure that was wise, sweetheart.”

“You never told me about any safety limits.”

“Yes, well... he’s a sturdy fellow, in decent health... he should be alright. He’ll be sleeping for hours, though, and he

won't be calling anyone to bed for a few days. His libido will need to recharge."

"What about you? What were you up to today?"

"I was recharging as well," he replies. "Eating, resting—fulfilling as few of my servantly duties as possible. I'll need all the energy I possess for whatever comes next."

He crawls onto my bed, pushes my legs farther apart, and sinks his face between my thighs with a satisfied hum, like eating me out is a comforting habit.

What if it was? What if he and I were together always, and we could enjoy each other anytime we wanted?

What if, after we kill the King, we run away together?

I doubt we'll get away with it. It's more likely that I'll die for killing the King, no matter how careful we are to avoid detection. But for a moment, as Rupert's tongue glides wetly through my pussy, I let my head fall back against the pillows, and I allow myself to dream.

The two of us, running a roadside inn together, somewhere very far away, somewhere no one knows us. We'll make new friends there. I'll bake, and Rupert will play the host, and with my managerial skill and his magic, our inn will become an anticipated stop along the road. We'll choose the location carefully... somewhere on a well-traveled route between cities, near enough to a village or two so we can become a popular destination for locals as well as travelers.

I can see it all—the stone chimneys and plaster walls, the glossy dark wood of the beams overhead. We'll have gaslamps and hot running water, and we'll adopt all the latest mechanical devices that make life easier... goddess, I'm so close to coming... Rupert and I will live in a cozy apartment at the back of the inn, and we...

"Sweetheart," Rupert murmurs against my clit. "What are you thinking about? Tell me it's not the fucking King, or I may have to go kill him at once, and damn the consequences."

"Oh... um, I was thinking about you, of course."

He rises higher between my legs. “You were not. Your mind was far away—I could tell.”

“I love that you could tell.” I smile at him, and he starts to smile back before shaking his head.

“No, no, you’re not distracting me with your adorable fucking face,” he says. “Tell me what you were thinking about, Juliette.”

“It’s going to scare you. It might frighten you so much you’ll run away and never return.”

“Damn. Now I’m twice as curious.”

I try to make myself say it. I toss around a few different ways to explain, but nothing feels right. Meanwhile my climax has receded, and I’m mad about it.

“Juliette,” he says sternly, holding my knees apart. “Tell me what you were thinking.” He dips his head, gives me a quick swirl of his tongue. I whimper and quiver as pleasure flares through me again.

Rupert smirks and gives my clit a little puckered kiss. “Tell me, or I won’t let you come.”

“Oh...” I let out a small sigh that’s half a pleading sob. “Fine... I was thinking about you and me running away together... opening an inn on a well-traveled road. Baking and ale and magic, your charm and my talent—we’d build wealth and reputation, side by side.”

He’s licking me again—long, deep strokes through my slit.

“We’d be together,” I continue, breathless, “and we’d enjoy simple things—drinks and jokes, laughter and good food, the exchange of news and stories with travelers—we’d make improvements to the comfort and quality of the place until we became known as *the* destination for that route.”

Rupert whispers that little Elvish rhyme again, and his tongue begins to vibrate as he drags it from my center up to my clit. His rough, warm hands find mine, and I clutch those strong male fingers eagerly, anchoring myself.

“And we’d fuck,” I gasp, poised on the edge of mind-shattering bliss. “We’d fuck, and kiss, and cuddle, and make fun

of each other, and argue, and read, and take the longest walks through the countryside—” Tears are leaking from the corners of my eyes, but I’m coming anyway, coming helplessly against the gentle buzz of his tongue.

He softens the vibration, easing me through the pleasure. Then he lets go of my hands, rises up on his knees, and takes out his cock. Without a word, he slides into my slick opening and thrusts slowly, smoothly. Each stroke is deeply satisfying, and not just for my body, because his rhythm feels like *yes, yes, yes* to everything I told him, even though he hasn’t spoken at all.

In the soft light of the lamp I watch his face. He’s holding my thighs, looking down at his cock surging in and out of my body. There’s a glimmer of moisture his dark lashes, a tremor of his mouth which he tries to hide by pressing his lips even tighter and clenching his jaw until muscles flex at his temples.

If it wasn’t ridiculous and impossible, I could swear this Half-Elf likes the sound of my imagined future. Likes it so much he can barely control his emotions.

Quietly I begin speaking again, sultry and low, as if I’m telling him the most indecent secrets. “We’d have horses at the inn, too. Maybe a couple dogs or cats. Some chickens. A garden full of the loveliest flowers... we could plant Elven herbs there, too. We’d be safe, and we’d be happy—”

Rupert makes a sound—harsh and broken, and yet there’s relief in it—relief that’s bone-deep, soul-cleansing. His groan is followed by the rhythmic flex of his cock in my body—a slow, powerful release.

Still inside me, he leans forward, lowers his body against mine. Kisses me tenderly, like he cherishes every second of this gentle bliss.

I kiss him back just as fondly, twining my arms around his neck.

When he ends the kiss and buries his face in my hair, his scruff grazing my cheek, I whisper, “Mine” in his ear. He presses his mouth to my ear in return and says hoarsely, fiercely, “Yours alone.”

A glorious thrill courses through my body. Neither of us said “love.” But its fragrance is in the air, in the musk of our joining and the scent of our whispers. It lingers in the look we exchange when he reluctantly parts from me and heads for the door. It trembles in my anxiety for him, my fear that he’ll be caught leaving my room.

I know he has magic and tricks to avoid being seen, but I can’t help worrying and wondering, even as I sink into a dream of the future we can never have.



THE TRICKSTER

Juliette is safe, for now. I don't think the King will require her to spin straw again so soon. Even if he doubts her claim that her abilities take months to recharge, he would probably allow her a few days to recover before testing her limits. He'll be sleeping for most of the morning, exhausted from last night, and then he'll have to catch up on meetings and tasks that he missed.

As Rupert, the servant of the House, I'm supposed to wait upon the women the King has conscripted—or kidnapped. And I was lax in fulfilling those duties yesterday, so today I must play the part better, or risk losing my place here, near Juliette.

This morning the women are allowed to roam the gardens awhile, and I'm one of the handful of servants who must stand motionless here and there among the flowerbeds and hedges, ready to fetch a drink or a fan as needed.

I keep my distance from Juliette, though she's within sight. Even in my disguise as a servant, a eunuch, I dare not show her special attention. Thanks to my stealth and spells, I don't think anyone has noticed my frequent trips to her room, but it's best to be safe and avoid my name being coupled with hers in anyone's

mind. The one sanctioned excursion to the kitchen was risky enough.

It's difficult to avoid looking at her, though. I steal glances when I'm sure no one's watching, treating myself to the vision that is Juliette, wearing a white dress covered in tiny flowers, with lace decorating her low neckline and more lace draping the ground when she walks. Her hair is up today, pinned under a hat which she doesn't seem to like. She keeps reaching up to adjust it, with a little unconscious pout of her mouth. I nearly laugh once when, with a petulant shove, she nearly knocks the hat from her head, and a maid rushes forward to fix the pins.

She spends most of her time with three women in particular. One is skinny and pale, with freckles, frizzy red hair, and a perpetually startled expression. The second is an arrogant, bronze-skinned beauty with scarlet eyes and lavender hair. Juliette seems most talkative and comfortable with the third member of the group—a pretty, dark-eyed woman with ebony skin and long braids.

As I'm fetching tea, lemonade, or iced punch for the other ladies, I notice that I'm not the only one with an eye for Juliette. Most of the guards circulate through the garden paths, but one guard stands in the shadows, watching only her. When she and her group move, he moves as well.

I've been a sneak and a trickster long enough that I recognize a spy when I see one.

He could be observing one of the other three, but it's unlikely. Juliette can spin straw into gold, and she gave the King the best night of his life. As such, she's top of the list for filling the role of Queen, and it makes sense that His Majesty would want to keep a closer eye on her.

It unsettles me, but it means our plan is working. As long as he believes her to be an asset, she is relatively safe—if "safe" is even a concept in this place.

After an hour or so in the gardens, the women take lunch on the terrace, and the suspicious-looking guard switches places with another, who continues to shadow Juliette. When they've finished lunch, the women are escorted back to their rooms, with the exception of two, who are being brought to the King. I

don't know whether he's interested in a demonstration of their magic or their mouths. They aren't my concern.

With the concubines returning to their chambers and the halls filled with people coming and going, I have the chance to disappear. I've been seen performing my duty, and now I have a vital errand to run.

First I stop by the kitchen and pull the cook, Mrs. Moorene, into the pantry for a moment's conversation.

"I'm going to fetch the herb we spoke of," I tell her in a low voice.

"Eyes everywhere," she whispers, plunging her hand into a bag of flour and extracting a small leather pouch that clinks slightly. "This was all I could get on such short notice. It will have to be enough."

"I'll make sure it is."

She cocks her head, eyeing me. "Don't do anything foolish."

"No promises." I grin, and she cracks a smile through her worried expression.

"I swear you've changed, Rupert. I'm not sure yet if it's for better or worse. Here, take this basket and shopping list. That way no one will question why you're leaving in the middle of the afternoon."

She's wise to provide me with the excuse. Venedict Luron, the steward of the House, is a sharp-eyed fellow with a nose for idleness. Lucky for me, he usually retires to his room early in the evening, so I haven't run afoul of him during my trips to see Juliette. But during the day, he's always stalking through the halls, making sure everyone is occupied in the running of the House. Goddess forbid anyone should take a nap, have a drink or a smoke, or snatch a single moment's peace when Venedict is on the prowl.

I could never work in a house like this for longer than a few weeks, and I pity those who must spend their lives here, beneath his unrelenting eye.

As the goddess would have it, I round a corner and nearly crash into him. But I pretend to be deeply immersed in my shopping list, and he says nothing as I hurry on through the halls. He thinks I've been sent on some important errand. And so I have.

Once I'm out of the House, past its gates, and beyond the main wall of the palace, I breathe easier. I've escaped the real Rupert's duties, and I'm free to investigate the source of the fennisley.

Goddess knows I'd rather be in Juliette's room right now, exploring her beautiful body, making her come over and over, spending myself inside her. But she wouldn't be happy if I suggested that. She would remind me of our goals and tell me that time is short.

With her voice and Rupert's memories in my mind, I hail a cab and ride deep into the seediest parts of Giltos.

The night that I changed my mind about leaving Juliette, when I returned to the alley, I took my time with Rupert Diggs, repressing his conscious mind while gingerly picking through his memories. Because of his fragile stasis and my own low energy levels, I had to do it in phases, until I finally discovered his contact for the fennisley—a black-market peddler of Elvish artifacts named Ayvish Thren.

Generations ago, when the Elves decided to perform the Withdrawal and officially retreat from human society, they requested that all their cultural items of power be returned. Some kingdoms and confederations agreed to do so freely, while some forced the Elves to buy back or bargain for the objects. Others refused to yield their Elvish artifacts at any price.

In the kingdoms where humans would not comply—Darthage among them—the Elves cast curses upon their own relics. They could not reclaim the objects with waging a bloody war, but they could spell the artifacts remotely and poison their use. Many people died from using cursed Elvish objects, until several rulers, including the King of Darthage, banned the use of Elf-made items altogether.

Of course, that only created a black market for Elvish relics, cursed or not. The uncursed items are the rarest and most

expensive, but even cursed objects are appealing to desperate humans. Some are willing to risk dire repercussions just to use Elvish magic. Dealers who offer cursed items for sale often provide written instructions so their buyers can either avoid triggering the curse or minimize its effects.

As a Half-Elf, a castoff, a rogue and a renegade, I've made some deals involving Elvish relics and antiquities—most of them purloined from my father's house. I considered those to be part of my rightful inheritance—what I was owed from the bastard who spawned and then scorned me.

So I don't judge Ayvish Thren for peddling magic. But according to Diggs' memories, he's also a dealer of thrash, an especially nasty drug some humans crave as a means of self-destruction. In my mind, that's a worse path, making coin off addicts with thrash-feeble brains who can't think beyond their next fix.

This magic merchant and thrash dealer further hides his identity by operating out of a sewing shop—the Gilded Thimble.

Despite its name, the place is anything but gilded. It's a crooked, smashed-looking sliver of a shop jammed between a cannery and a greasy-looking bakehouse that I'm fairly sure bakes very little bread and probably has a naginleaf farm buried in its recesses. In fact, I'd bet my dick every shop in this fetid-smelling street is a respectable front for despicable deeds.

Not that I mind. Some of my best deeds have been despicable.

I shove open the door to the Gilded Thimble—and then I shove harder, while the hinges groan in protest. When I finally manage to push it wide enough and squeeze myself through, I have to kick it shut behind me.

It's dark in the shop—fucking gloomy. Bolts and bolts of dusty cloth are stacked from floor to ceiling, covering every bit of the walls. It looks as if most of the fabric hasn't been disturbed in years. Big barrels clutter the scant floor space, each one filled with more vertical bolts of cloth. There's a rack of greasy-looking ribbons, a series of narrow shelves lined with

spools of dingy thread, and a bookshelf stuffed with tattered paper patterns.

I sidle through the jumble to reach the narrow counter, which is studded with needle-stuffed pincushions, as if to fend off any customers who might have been brave enough to make it this far.

There's a domed bell on the counter, but when I press the button on the top, it clanks rather than ringing.

"Ho there!" I call out. "I'm looking for Ayvish Thren!" My voice barely travels through the close, stuffy space; the sound is deadened by the ceiling-high stacks of fabric.

There's a patched curtain between a pair of overstuffed bookshelves, so I vault over the counter, narrowly avoiding the needles, and I sweep it aside.

The shop continues on, in deeper gloom, like a tunnel into a mountain. Tall and broad as I am, I barely fit through the narrow passage between piles of wooden crates. There's another curtain, and when I duck through it, something comes hurtling toward my face.

My hand flies up, grabbing my attacker's wrist, halting the oncoming swing of the cudgel he's wielding.

"Rupert!" he gasps. "Fuck, I wasn't expecting you."

He looks just as he did in Rupert's memories—a gaunt man with a scraggly beard. His eyes keep darting from me to the curtained doorway, then to various other points in the room. Is he always this nervous, or am I just special?

In the dim bluish light of the smoky lamps, I scan the room, picking out the hallmarks of his trade as a thrash maker and dealer—pipettes, tubes, trays, scrapers, burners. No sign of anything remotely magical. In Rupert's memories, I could see the setting in which they spoke about the fennisley. They were in the back room of a tavern, and from that conversation I gleaned the name of this shop. But I couldn't see the layout of the Golden Thimble in Rupert's mind—I could only glean the vague impression that somewhere within that shop lay all sorts of forbidden magical items.

I veer my gaze back to Thren, whose wrist is still in my grip.

“Ease up, man,” he says.

“I will, if you back off.” I release him, and he sets down his cudgel.

“Can’t be too careful.” He massages his bruised wrist. “Goddess, Rupert. What’s gotten into you?”

Judging from what I’ve seen of Rupert Diggs’ mind, he was a mild-mannered fellow, for a guard. A lover, not a fighter, forced into service as a guard because his family didn’t know what else to do with him. And he had the misfortune to glance admiringly at the wrong woman, at exactly the wrong moment.

In some strange way, I feel like I owe this to the real Rupert. I’ve borrowed his life and likeness for a short time—the least I can do is carry out his revenge. Especially since it suits my goals. Otherwise I wouldn’t bother, of course. I can’t be fulfilling vendettas for everyone I decide to use along my way.

“You know why I’m here,” I tell Thren. “The fennisley.”

“Keep your fucking voice down,” he squawks, his eyes bulging. “I told you, the price has gone up. Eight thousand chrons.”

“I’ll give you six thousand.”

He shakes his head, avarice gleaming in his eyes. “Eight, or no deal.”

“How do I know you even have it?” I counter. “I can’t be expected to shell out eight thousand for a product I haven’t seen. Show it to me, and then we’ll talk.”

Thren looks me up and down. “Got any weapons?”

“No.”

“Prove it. Strip.”

Grimacing, I pull off my boots and set them aside. Thren’s gaze latches on them, and I’m fairly sure he guesses that they’re special. He might even know they’re of Elvish make, even though they’re designed to mimic human handiwork. Only the keenest of eyes could tell the difference, and this fellow has

made a career out of identifying and selling Elvish relics and gear.

But he says nothing as I remove my pants, tunic and vest and stand before him naked except for my socks. “See? Nothing.”

There’s another sort of interest in his eyes as he scans my body, but he only licks his lips and says, “Fair enough. Get dressed, but leave the boots up here.”

Up here? So we’re going down, then.

I pull on my pants and tunic, then grab the vest, thankful that he didn’t inspect it further. The only items in its concealed pockets are Juliette’s notebook and the charmed vial that links me to the original Rupert, and I don’t want to be separated from either item.

Thren runs his fingers over one of the tables, whose legs appear to be bolted to the floor. He fumbles for a second, then presses down. With a pop, a click, and a scrape of wood, the table and a section of the floor beneath it swing aside, revealing a square hole and a cramped spiral staircase of rusty metal, descending into bluish gloom.

“You first.” Thren regards me with hooded eyes.

Rupert may have been an honest, good-hearted sort—a simple, trusting man—but I am neither honest nor trusting, good-hearted nor simple. I know a trap when I see it. And I have the advantage, because Thren thinks I’m a mild-mannered human eunuch, a disgraced palace servant in a precarious position—but I am a Half-Elf, gifted with magic. And I have combat skills too, beaten into me by my father’s staff and his riding crop.

I’m not afraid of this two-faced dealer of cursed objects.

I descend the spiral staircase into the dark, whispering a shield charm under my breath. I suspect Thren will throw some sort of Elvish magic my way, and the shield will deflect most of it, if not all.

Blue Elf-lights glow along the walls of the subterranean chamber. They function off the energy of plants, usually a

specific type of vine called amsivore, and sure enough, the walls are covered with it. In the center of the room, two tables hold boxes, trays, canisters, and parcels, all containing Elvish items, if I had to guess.

Something sparks off my shield—a malevolent force trying to penetrate to my skin. A paralytic curse, judging by the rhythmic pulse of the energy—a spell that would have knocked me down and rendered me helpless. But my shield defends me, and I spin just in time to duck the blade that Thren is swinging toward my throat.

I recognize that blade instantly as the handiwork of Hamon Azanel, a renowned Elvish craftsman. If it's the sword I think it is, it's priceless—and it's also the source of the paralytic curse he tried to use on me.

I spin out of range of the weapon and glance around for something I can use to defend myself. I'd rather not use any more of my magical energy unless I have to.

“How are you still moving?” Thren grits out, slashing at me again. I pick up a small chest from a table and throw it at him.

“Stop!” he shouts, fumbling, trying to catch it. “These objects are extremely volatile! You'll kill us both!”

“I'm happy to take that chance. I'll heal faster than you will.”

“You're not Rupert. Who are you?”

I grab a tray of vials and nearly throw it at him, but it strikes me that perhaps the fennisley is on that tray, and I'd rather not lose the one thing I need from this man. So instead I dart around the table and spin into a high-kick. My sock-clad foot slams into Thren's wrist, and he yelps at the impact, dropping the blade.

I grab the sword as it falls—and immediately a thrilling shock of power races up my arm. I gasp with the force of it, but I manage to hold on.

“That's mine,” snarls Thren. “You won't be able to use it properly unless you—”

“Unless I kill you? So it is Axidor then. Thank you for the confirmation.” I switch my hold on the sword and ram it deep into his chest, driving him backward to the wall and pinning him there.

“You tried to kill me,” I tell him. “This is what you deserve.”

I watch the frenzy in his eyes fade to vacancy, watch his head slump and his limbs go limp.

His death is unfortunate, but in addition to trying to kill me, he represented a loose end. He could have betrayed the plot to the King. It’s better that he has been silenced.

I yank the weapon out of his chest, and his body tumbles to the floor. Grimacing, I step away from the pooling blood to inspect the sword, feeling the quiver of its power. It’s a simple, streamlined weapon, plain silver with a leather-wrapped hilt.

Experimentally I place my palm against the tip of the blade and push.

Instead of going through my hand, the sword slides into itself like a telescope and shrinks down until it’s the size of a silver pin, easily tucked away out of sight.

“Fuck, that’s incredible,” I mutter. I fumble with the silver pin, tweaking and pushing, trying to locate the trigger point for the size-changing mechanism—a truly masterful blend of science and magic. Finally, when I twist the head of the pin, the sword springs to its full length again.

When it’s at full-size, there’s a notch where the crosspiece meets the base of the blade, and when I press that spot, a blast of power shoots from the sword-point—a paralytic pulse like the one Thren shot at me.

There’s no doubt about it—this sword is Axidor, crafted for Liacan, an Elvish warrior-priest who was murdered by a mob of humans a few years before the Withdrawal. Anyone can shrink or reveal the sword and use it in battle, but its other magical properties are useless to all except its true owner, who must kill the former owner to fully lay claim to the weapon.

Axidor is the most famous blade in Elvish history, and the most significant to our culture. And I've won its allegiance.

If I returned this artifact to the Kin, my father would be proud of me, perhaps for the first time in his life.

After shrinking Axidor again, I insert the gold pin into the spine of Juliette's leather notebook for safekeeping. Then I survey the contents of the tray on the table. Each vial is labeled, but none of them contain fennisley.

It takes several minutes of hunting through boxes and canisters before I locate a paper packet of dried fennisley, carefully labeled. I unseal the packet and take a sniff of the contents to confirm that it's the correct herb, with the distinctive musty odor I've heard about. Satisfied, I tamp the packet shut again, pressing tightly so the adhesive will stick.

As much as I'd like to explore more of the treasures here and maybe take some with me, I can't risk smuggling contraband into the palace. So I climb the spiral steps, leaving Thren's body to decompose under the Elf-lights, among his forbidden relics.

"Farewell, asshole," I mutter, while I drag the trapdoor and the table back into place over the steps. Let him rot down there, while I return triumphant with the money, the fennisley, and a historic sword.

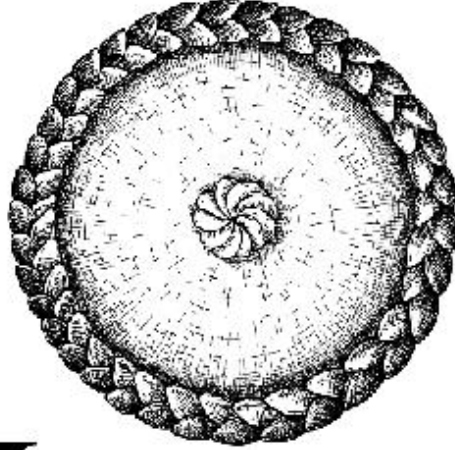
This errand was a fucking success. I can't wait to tell Juliette everything.

I've passed through the fabric shop and my hand is on the street door when something occurs to me—a prudent measure that's out-of-character for someone like me. I like following the bend of the stream, going with the current, sailing wherever the wind goes. Perhaps it's Juliette's influence, or my new-found craving for a life beyond the one I've led. But this idea won't leave me alone.

I should lay the spell on the fennisley now. If I return to the palace, I could be interrupted at any moment—but here, I have solitude, space, and plenty of time to devise the right spell. I won't need the King's essence for this—only his name and identity, woven into the words. This isn't a carnal charm—it's a

lethal curse, the stuff of souls and mortality. I will need to compose the right poem to offer the goddess—the most complex chant I've ever invented. And she will exact a price, a heavy toll on my life's energy. I'll need to rest and eat afterward, if I can manage to function at all after such a casting.

Whatever happens, it's best that I endure it here, away from the prying eyes at the House of Bounty. Thren probably has living quarters upstairs—I'll find them, take stock of what food stores he has... and then design the spell that will kill the King.



JULIETTE

I barely have time to unpin the annoying hat from my hair when two guards burst into my bedroom. “Come with us.”

“What? Why?” Instinctively I back away, my mind racing. Where are they taking me? To the King? He couldn’t possibly want sex again so soon.

The guards hurry me through the halls, down the long passage connecting the House of Bounty to the palace, and along a vaguely familiar route down to the lower levels, beneath the King’s residence. This time, instead of a jail cell, they take me to a corridor lined with storage rooms and shove me into one. It’s hard to tell the room’s dimensions since it’s piled high with straw, but judging from the width and length of the vaulted ceiling, the space is huge.

To the left and right of the doorway are boxes of bobbins, and on the bit of the flagstone floor that’s not covered with straw, there’s a spinning wheel and a wooden bench.

“You will spin all this straw into gold,” announces one of the guards. He points to a bell-cord by the door. “Ring this if you need food, drink, or the privy. You have tonight, tomorrow,

and the following night. By dawn on the second day, it must be done.”

“I can’t do this.” I search his eyes, desperate for a sign of understanding, of pity. “I told the King my magic takes time to replenish. I won’t be ready for this task for months.”

The guard exchanges a malevolent smirk with his companion. “His Majesty thought you might make an excuse. He says that if you cannot accomplish this task within three days, your friend Shenya will suffer the removal of her tongue and genitals, and she will serve you for the remainder of your time in the House of Bounty.”

Cold horror clutches my lungs. I can’t breathe—can’t speak.

Shenya, mutilated, silenced, and forced to serve as my maid? It’s unthinkable.

“Shall we fetch the girl for the procedure?” asks the guard. “Or will you accomplish the King’s will?”

“I can’t do it. I told the King as much.” My voice is strident, desperate, angry. “He can’t do that to Shenya. She has a magical gift... she’s one of the potential brides.”

“Her gift is of little use to the King, and he has other concubines,” replies the guard coolly. “Will you obey His Majesty and perform the task he has set for you?”

I grit my teeth, infuriated by his apathy. I want to smack him. “As I’ve said, I can’t perform the magic again so quickly. But for my friend’s sake, I will try. Would you please give the King a message? Ask him to come and speak with me, or grant me an audience so I can explain my abilities and beg for his mercy and patience. Unless he wants me to overtax myself and die trying to save my friend.”

Neither guard replies. They only shove me into the storage room, slam the door with a resounding clang, and lock it up.

No. This can’t be happening. This wasn’t the plan—we were supposed to have *time*. Time for the King to recover, time for him to try out some of the other girls and their powers. Time for my fake magic to renew itself.

The King—or perhaps Lady Kessalif—didn't believe me when I said I wouldn't be able to perform the spell again for a year. I overplayed my hand—I made the span of time too long for believability.

Maybe the King even suspects something amiss with last night's illusion of debauchery. Maybe giving him four cupcakes was too much. Fuck, I'm an idiot. Both times I overdid the ruse, took it too far, made him suspicious. Unlike Rupert, I'm not a trickster by nature—I'm not used to this sort of thing. And now, because of my inexperience and foolishness, Shenya is in dreadful danger.

I could possibly still salvage this, if Rupert were anywhere around. I know once he discovers where I've been taken, he'll come to save me. He had some way of finding my room that first night—he can find me again.

Until then, all I can do is wait.

First, I pace the floor—but I can only go about four steps in each direction before I scuff into the piles of straw. So I give that up, and instead I unpack a couple of the boxes and line up the bobbins, ready for use. That'll save some time later.

There's nothing else to do. And the idleness, more than anything else, sends my brain into a frantic spiral. I'm not used to being trapped like this. I *need* something to do.

I gather a bunch of the straw and sit down at the spinning wheel, knowing full well that nothing will happen. Even if I could remember the poem Rupert recited, I have no well of magical energy inside me from which to draw.

I slap a handful of straw onto the wheel and hold it there a moment, then press the pedal. The wheel turns, and the pieces of straw tumble to the floor, as expected.

Why do some people have magic, while others don't? It's unfair. I've always thought so—not with anger, just with a kind of rueful acknowledgment. I never really minded not having magic because I didn't need it. I had enough resources inside me—my brain, my will power, my goals, my health. All those things were advantage enough... why should I whine for *more* privilege?

But this time, it's not just about me. It's about Shenya. It infuriates me that the King would so easily cast her aside—a sweet treasure of a woman—just because her magic can't give him rooms full of gold. Just because she decided to be my friend.

I won't let it happen.

“Rupert,” I whisper. “Rupert, where are you?”

Even as I say it, I hear the echo of his voice in my memory, a low protest: “That's not my name.”

He's told me that twice, maybe thrice, and yet he hasn't offered his real name.

I heard a legend once, about the importance of Elvish names. How they can be used to make wishes, or something... I can't remember exactly how it worked, or what the rules were. I know there was some rule or condition. Fuck, if only I could remember... that legend could explain why Rupert is so reluctant to share his own name. He doesn't fully trust me yet. He thinks I'd use it against him. But I would never. I've been used by someone close to me, by my own brother, and I would never do that to the person I lo—

My thoughts pull up sharply before that word, like a carriage driver reining in a skittish horse.

But my heart already spoke it, already pumped it into my veins, circulated it through my blood, fed my bones with it.

I may as well admit the truth. Unexpected as this has been, dangerous though my connection with Rupert is... I love him.

Despite everything I still don't know about him, I care deeply for the blue-eyed Half-Elf who followed me to the royal city. And he cares for me too. He has told me so, by his actions and a handful of precious words.

Real love doesn't abandon, doesn't forget. It ponders and works and plans. It searches out its object and will not be satisfied until it has found that other part of itself and become whole again.

So I will believe in Rupert, and I will believe in myself.

And I do believe... for the next few hours, until his continued absence drives me into despair and I begin to picture Shenya being bound and permanently mutilated as my punishment. To make matters worse, she'll be forced to serve me daily—*me*, the cause of her pain. She'll resent me, or hate me, and if she doesn't, I'll still suffer anguish every day, knowing what they did to her because of me.

She doesn't deserve that, and neither do I. But if Rupert doesn't come to me soon, that's exactly what will happen.

Can Rupert even spin all of this straw into gold? Last time he was nearing his limit, and there's so much more now. Maybe the King will be satisfied with a partial conversion of the straw.

If only we'd been able to destroy the King sooner. If only I'd killed him last night, when he lay on the bed, helpless to pleasure.

But if he might have sensed the danger, even in the throes of an orgasm, and if he did, he'd have overcome me and killed me on the spot.

Suppose I *had* managed to get the job done—the guards would have known it was me, immediately. I would never have escaped the palace alive.

Still... I should have tried. I should have risked it all.

I didn't know the King would threaten anyone else. I thought we had *time*.

I prop my elbows on my knees and let my face drop into my hands. The tears are swelling again, and I let them come, because if I hold them back, I fear I'll send myself into another paroxysm of panic. I might even faint this time, and without anyone to catch me, I might bang my head on the stone floor. A head injury is not something I want to risk, not when my mind is my only weapon in this place.

So I let myself weep.



I'm just hitting my stride, getting deep into a really good cry, when there's a soft scratching noise inside the lock and the door of my prison opens.

Rupert darts inside, closing the door behind him quickly and quietly.

"Fuck, Juliette!" he hisses, his eyes wide with alarm as he takes in the sheer volume of the straw.

"I know." I sniffle and wipe my eyes. "There's so much."

"And so soon. He didn't give you any time to recover—nowhere near the amount of time you asked for, anyway."

"He knows I lied. He thinks he can force me into doing this for him... he threatened Shenya with terrible things. Do you think... is this something you can do?"

I hate to ask it of him, but I don't have a choice. Shenya must be spared. Yet even as I ask the question, I notice how pale he is—how he sways a little on his feet. His face looks leaner somehow, more gaunt—as if vitality has been sucked out of him.

"I had to use magic a few times today, including one complex spell this afternoon, not to mention what I spent getting in here. They have you under heavier guard this time, and Venedict wouldn't agree to my being your servant while you're sequestered. He said you had a bell and could ring for what you wanted—no need to have a servant posted outside the door in addition to guards. I had to use a strong reverie spell on the guards to access the room... I don't think I can do this. How long did they give you?"

My throat tightens as more tears well up in my eyes. I choke out the words. "Two days."

"Alright." He presses his fingertips to his forehead. "Alright. Three days. If they bring plenty of food, and if I can

take breaks, I can make it. The problem is, once the spell begins, I can't stop until it's done, or I have to begin again with a new inciting object. Which brings me to the question I should have asked first—do you have another object made of gold? Something meaningful? That gold ring, perhaps?" He points to my father's wedding ring.

I pull it off my finger. "Yes, it's gold, as far as I know... and yes, it means something to me." My voice trembles. "It's the last memento I have of my parents, since you took my mother's necklace."

"I'm sorry." Rupert's blue eyes sear mine, hot with sympathy.

"He's taking *everything*," I whisper fiercely. "My dignity, my hope, my parents, my safety, my friends, my freedom... I want him gone."

Despite his weariness, Rupert smiles. It's a dark, malicious grin. "If we can get through this, sweetheart, we can do that. We can end him."

That keen confidence in his gaze can only mean one thing. "You got it?" I gasp.

"I did. And it's ready."

"That was the complex magic you performed today?"

"Yes."

We both stand still, our gazes fused by the joint awareness of how close we're getting to our goal.

"There's just *this* left," I tell him. "This final obstacle, and then we do it."

He nods, but there's a quiver of uncertainty and pain across his handsome features. Maybe he's afraid of potential consequences from his people if they find out about his interference in human governmental affairs.

To be honest, I'm scared I'll be executed by my own people for killing the King, even though I'm doing this for everyone's good.

Maybe we're both foolish to believe that two people who just met a few days ago can succeed in toppling a monarchy.

It's either extreme foolishness, or a cleverly calculated risk. I've made risky decisions before, in the course of managing the mill and my baking business—but those were miniscule compared to *this*. And yet, on the surface, our plot looks so simple. A rare, undetectable poison in the King's food. A few bites, and the deed will be done.

"We're doing this," I tell Rupert firmly.

"It's what you want," he says. "And what he deserves."

"Best for everyone."

"Yes."

"So... you'll try to do this?" I survey the heaps of golden straw, piled high above our heads, filling the whole vast room, right up to the corners where the walls meet the ceiling.

Rupert turns whiter, and he swallows hard. "I will try."

"Don't hurt yourself, please. Only do what you can, and we'll figure out the rest."

"We'd best call for some food now," he says, "I'll eat first and rest a bit, and then we can save some of the food for me to eat while I'm working. As I mentioned, once I begin, I can't stop, and if we open the door for supplies, they'll see me in here. Best to order everything now."

"Right. You hide in the straw—I'll call for sustenance. Once it arrives, we can begin."



THE TRICKSTER

Her father's ring was heavy, solid. A beautiful piece. I hated to dissolve it into the spell, but it had to be done, and it worked wonders. The emotions it held were even stronger and more vivid than those from her mother's necklace—fresher memories, more potent. I'm hours into the process now, spinning endlessly, guiding the thread and pumping the pedal while Juliette feeds the spell with straw.

Now and then I snatch bites of the food that was delivered, or I gulp some wine.

I always visualize my energy as a ball of yarn or string being slowly unspooled. There's much less of it today, and it's diminishing with frightening speed, growing smaller by the second.

Maybe I should have waited to charm the fennisley. But I thought we might be able to get the cook to put it in the King's dinner, or perhaps in a late-night snack. No such luck, because the moment I returned I heard two of the servants gossiping about the "gold-spinning girl" and how she'd been taken for another demonstration. Despite the King's earlier unease about

making Juliette's "gift" public, it appears the news has spread, at least among the servants.

The moment I heard she'd been taken, I went to look for her. I didn't take time to find the cook and give her the fennisley. I'm regretting that decision now; but at this point it's too late. I have to play this hand through to the end, whatever that may be.

I need to reserve a little magic—enough to distract the guards and get myself out of here unseen. Whatever happens, I can't be found in this cell with Juliette. That will throw her power into question and put her in more imminent danger.

But if I spin too little of the straw, the King will be unhappy. He will mutilate Juliette's friend, which will carve a permanent wound into my girl's heart.

I can't allow that to happen. I won't.

Juliette and I talked for a while toward the beginning, but we're both growing exhausted now, deadened by the rhythm of the wheel and the pedal, the countless bundles of straw, the ongoing parade of bobbins, both empty and full.

She's singing softly. Humming sometimes, and other times I catch a few murmured words... something about "the lake was her face and the moon was mine" and "kisses on mirrors beneath cold, cold snow."

"What is that awful song?" I ask.

She breaks off the tune. "Rude. You don't like my singing?"

"Your singing is lovely. The song sounds dreadfully dire. Songs should be jaunty and bright. Raunchy." I wink at her.

"I know a few raunchy ones."

"Do you now?"

"I'll sing you one."

I'm about to reply, but a tremor runs through my body at that moment—and my heart stops beating.

Only for a second or two, and then it starts up again, but I'm shaken.

“Rupert?” Juliette’s forehead puckers with concern. “Are you alright?”

“Fine.” I force a smile. “Sing to me while I work.”

Just a little longer. Until the end of the song, and then I’ll stop. I’ve got that much left in me.

Juliette’s voice takes on a merry lilt, singing about a young milkmaid who is seduced first by a tinker, then by a tailor, and then by a knight, before finally losing her heart to a princess with a talented tongue. The song rhymes cleverly and spares no detail—just the sort the Elves enjoy, though I can tell by the rhythm it’s not an Elvish composition.

I cling to the song like a shipwrecked sailor clings to a broken bit of the ship, the only thing keeping him afloat. Whatever I may envision of my inner resources, my yarn-ball of magical energy, I don’t have a precise gauge for it; but I do know that I’ve never gotten this low before. I’ve never felt this hideous quaking of my bones, the hectic spasming of my heart muscle, the pinpricks of pain all through my skull. I’ve never experienced the thickening of my breath, the slow heave of my lungs.

Juliette breaks off the song partway through what was probably the final verse. “Rupert. Stop. Right now.”

I try to speak, but my tongue feels twice its normal size and my lungs won’t haul in enough air for the words.

“Rupert!” She steps forward. “You look like death. Stop!”

My foot keeps moving mechanically on the pedal, my hands continue their motion along the wheel, along the thread, over and over. I’m... frozen into the spell. I’ve become part of it, and I don’t have enough strength left to pull myself free.

A panicked impulse flits through my brain, fueled by an inner voice somewhere deep inside me crying, *Stop, stop, you’re dying, you’re dying! The magic will eat you up until you’re dead!*

But I can’t act on the warning. Something is wrong. This is more than exhaustion, this is a compulsion. I’m being held here on purpose until I’m drained dry.

“You can’t stop, can you?” Swearing at the realization, Juliette leaps behind me, gripping me under the arms and trying to pull me from the spinning wheel’s bench. But I’m fused there, and even her strength can’t move me.

Juliette has ceased feeding the spell, but the spinning wheel isn’t done with me. A current of air stirs around the wheel, growing stronger, sucking straw from the piles into the glittering transmutation circle. Since Juliette won’t feed it, the spell is feeding itself.

Dimly, in the hollow haze of my brain, I register the thought that this isn’t any magic I’ve done. It’s something else. Another force set in play. A curse infused into either the wheel or the straw, undetectable to me because it was laid by a talented human sorceress.

“What is happening?” There are tears in Juliette’s voice, tears in her eyes—the sweetest tears—I can smell their fragrance faintly through the metallic odor inside my own head. I’m bleeding from my nose, and I think from my eyes as well... something’s trickling out of them, warm and wet.

Juliette yanks at me again, tries to shove me away from the wheel. When that doesn’t work, she starts kicking the wheel. She smashes one of the bobbin boxes and shoves the broken chunks into the wheel, trying to block its motion, but the wood is sucked into the spell and transformed. The bobbin to my right is swollen fat with gold thread. When it can hold no more, lines of gold spill onto the floor and pile up in a glimmering heap.

She’s sobbing openly now, my sweet girl... leaning in, kissing my motionless lips and stiff cheeks over and over. Her mouth is wet with my blood. “Please,” she whispers. “Please, please... please stop. Please tell me how to make it stop.”

I’m paralyzed, fused to the spell and the wheel, feeling the last dregs of life flow out of me in a merciless stream.

Juliette is crying and holding me, urging me to breathe, to break free, and she doesn’t hear the door open. But I do.

She doesn’t hear the measured steps of men entering the room.

But I do.

And I know, in that moment, that she and I have grossly underestimated the King.



JULIETTE

Someone else is moving in the room. Sauntering past me, leaning over Rupert, inspecting his paralyzed face and glazed, bleeding eyes. I cling to him, anguish and anger whirling inside me.

It's the King, Lady Kessalif, and a few guards. And they don't seem surprised to find Rupert in here with me.

They *know*.

Mixed with my terror for Rupert is the sickening realization that our ruse is at an end. Our scheme has failed. It's over.

"You were right, Kessalif." The King flicks Rupert's forehead. "The lying bitch had help. But he looks human to me. He's that guard with the wandering eyes, the lech who desired Meldrid."

"It's an illusion, Majesty," Lady Kessalif responds. "A clever one. He has charmed himself to look like a servant of the House. He'll have the totem somewhere on his person—we have only to destroy it, and his true identity will reveal itself."

She stretches her hand over the spinning wheel, and the spell ceases instantly. The glittering gold light fades, the motion stills, and Rupert sags backward, his head lolling, his body toppling from the bench toward the floor. I intercept his fall and catch his head in my lap.

“What did you do to him?” I seethe at Lady Kessalif.

She gives me a look of mingled amusement and pity, then pats the spinning wheel. “One of my best curses yet. It traps the spellcaster within the spell until their life energy is completely drained. He’ll live... barely. But he is so thoroughly depleted that he cannot act against you, my King.”

She bends, reaching toward Rupert, but I knock her hand away with a savage hiss.

Lady Kessalif nods to the guards, and they surge forward, seizing my arms and pulling me away from Rupert. I twist down and bite one of the male hands clutching me—I buck and kick, wrench and claw, fighting to break free.

“Such an animal,” says the King. “A real tigress in bed. Too bad you are also a liar and a traitor, child, or you might have made a fine queen.”

At least he doesn’t realize the cupcakes were spelled; he really thinks we had amazing sex. I’m on the brink of telling him the truth, just to spoil that memory, but something holds me back. Any ignorance on his part is power on mine. Besides, it doesn’t seem wise to clue him in to the possibilities of targeted magic in his food.

The King waves his hand to the bobbins full of gold, the gesture encompassing the leftover straw as well. “You thought you could trick me? Trick Kessalif? Pretend this gift was yours, while hiding the true caster?”

He pauses, maybe expecting a response, but I’m focused on Lady Kessalif, who is bending over Rupert.

“Don’t touch him,” I snarl, lurching against the guards’ grip.

She looks up at me for a second. Then she runs her hands over his body, into his pockets, along his chest. “Such a fine

strong body, brought so low by his own foolishness and my skill. Ah, here it is.” She pulls out a tiny round jar, stoppered with a cork. Placing it on the floor, she smashes it with her heel and grinds the contents into a pasty mess.

Even with the jar broken, Rupert looks the same to me—but by the way the King inhales sharply, I know the illusion has shattered. Everyone in the room can now see Rupert in his true form.

“A Half-Elf.” Lady Kessalif cups her hand under Rupert’s jaw and lifts his face, turning it for her inspection. “It is as we hoped, Majesty.”

The King rubs his hands together, a pleased smirk stretching his toadlike mouth. “Do you know his true name, girl? Is that why he assisted you?”

“Why do you want his name?” I counter.

“Learn the true name of an Elf, and you receive one wish, granted freely,” says Lady Kessalif. “Just *one* wish. But for Half-Elves, the will of the Kin is weakened with human blood, so they may be subjugated more fully. Learn the true name of a Half-Elf, and you control their magic for the rest of their lives. You may command them, and they have no choice but to obey.”

Shock and horror thrill through my stomach, but I lift my chin defiantly. “I don’t know his true name. He helped me because I was desperate, trapped in the hands of a murderous monster, with no way of escape, prey to a lie my brother told. And you—” I fix the King with a glare, even though I’m shaking, even though terror knots my gut— “you are a cruel, wretched, dreadful man who does not deserve his throne or his title. We all hate you—at least everyone who knows what you really are, what you’ve done.”

“Is that so?” The King strides toward me, raises his hand, and cuffs me across the mouth so hard that blood spurts immediately from my lip. “Take her to the torture room. Cut off her fingers, her toes, her genitals, her nose, her ears, and her tongue.”

“If I may, my Lord,” says Lady Kessalif quietly. “There appears to be a bond between these two. We can use her for

leverage to get his name. Perhaps we should postpone the mutilation, and use the threat of it to persuade the Half-Elf to cooperate.”

The King hesitates, considering, then says grudgingly, “Very well. For now, the liar shall be imprisoned, but not mutilated. Take her away.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” reply the guards.

I thought Lady Kessalif was fascinating at first—I was rather in awe of her. But now I despise her for submitting to this horrendous man, and I hate her for what she has done to Rupert, even if she did postpone my terrible fate.

The guards drag me roughly down a couple of corridors and hurl me into a cell. Apparently now that I’m disgraced, marked for mutilation and death, they have no reason to treat me decently. Although a few bruises are nothing compared to the torture that lies in store.

The door clangs shut, the padlock clicks, and the guards’ feet tromp away.

I lean against the wall of my cell, my eyes stinging with anger. When I left my village, I was afraid, yes—but I was afraid for *me*. Now there are other people at risk—people I care about.

Why did I have to *care*? Why did I make friends? And why did I have to fall in love *now*, of all times, and *here*, of all places?

I can’t see a way out. I don’t know how to fix it.

They’re going to torture me to force Rupert to reveal his name. Judging by what I know of the King, the torture is going to be cruelly intimate—and judging by what I know of Rupert, he will give in quickly to spare me from pain. However careless and coarse he may pretend to be, he has a soft heart, and he loves me—I know he does. He’ll confess the name, and the King will use it to control him for the rest of his life.

I have to keep that from happening, somehow. Desperately I climb to my feet and take stock of my surroundings.

In this tiny prison cell, there is no spinning wheel, only a bucket and a thin, stained mattress. I can see bits of yellow straw sticking out through the ripped cloth.

Straw.

Straw into gold.

I will never know what possessed my brother to make that exact claim. But those words of his, careless or calculated, changed the course of multiple lives.

Where is Prain now? If he did what I said, he's in a faraway town, choosing *not* to piss away my hard-earned savings. Maybe he has contacted someone who can help him—perhaps a physician of the mind, one with expertise in treating people with compulsions like his. With some retraining of his brain and habits, he can overcome his desire for drink and games of chance.

That's the future I want for him, the future that makes me feel as if all this was worth something. I don't like to think about the fact that Prain is probably lying drunk in some sex worker's bed, or wasting the last of my savings on a bet that won't pay off.

People rarely live up to one's expectations of them. I've always thought it was important to keep loving them and expecting the best of them anyway, in the hopes that they would one day live up to their potential.

But perhaps it's just as important to know when you've helped someone enough. When you've pulled them out of harm's way too many times. When you need to let them taste the bitter consequences of their actions instead of letting them drag you into the depths along with them.

I'm grateful for one thing, though. Without Prain's wild claim, without his self-serving scheme, I would never have met Rupert. And Rupert is a soul of purest gold—brash and confident on the outside, a self-proclaimed rogue, yet soft and mellow inside, deeply in need of reassurance and someone to bring out his best qualities.

Rupert is someone I can count on. He has saved me again and again.

But he's drained now, helpless and empty, and he can't rescue me anymore. I have to be the one who saves him, before it's too late for either of us.



The guards return much sooner than I expected and take me to a lower level of the dungeon—a cold, dank room full of tables, serrated tools, whips, and stocks. After stripping off my clothing, they lay me out on a large wooden table, locking my wrists and ankles into shackles so that my limbs are splayed wide and I can't move. There's a slope to the table's surface, leading to a groove that runs to the edge. It's designed for collecting spilled blood and funneling it off the table to a drain in the stone floor.

I hate being naked and vulnerable in this cold, metallic room full of blades and threatening gazes. I want to scream and protest, to beg and weep. My body is trembling all over, not just because of the chill of the cell but at the indignity of being stripped before strangers. I endured the enforced nudity when I was bathed along with the other girls at the House of Bounty, but this feels different—even more invasive, more frightening. Still, I struggle to stay quiet and suppress my trembling. I refuse to give them the satisfaction of knowing how much this upsets me.

There's a lofted area in the torture room, a platform with large cushioned chairs where people can sit and observe what's taking place. Shortly after I'm bound to the table, the King sweeps in, accompanied by Lady Kessalif. Rupert is dragged in after them. He's half-naked, and I hate that I'm seeing him shirtless for the first time under these circumstances. There are tattoos on his body—stripes around his biceps, a sun and a snake on his torso. His head hangs forward, his left eye bruised purple, his lips puffy and seamed with blood. They've beaten him while he was helpless.

His skin is slicked with sweat, and even from this distance I can tell he's shaking, probably sick from the loss of energy, the physical injuries, and whatever they gave him to restore him to consciousness.

The guards fling him into a chair, where he slumps with his head bowed. The King steps over to him, grabs Rupert's hair, and jerks up his face—that beautiful, brutalized, pain-wracked face.

“None of that, pet,” says the King. “I need you alert to watch the fun.” He pats Rupert's cheek with a rough familiarity, almost a fondness, that makes me feel sick. “Look what we have for you.”

Through swollen eyes, Rupert looks. Sees me stretched naked on the table, my head turned toward him. With sweet pain I remember lying on the kitchen table and letting him coat me with frosting.

“Don't do this.” Rupert's voice is a raw scrape through his throat. “Let her go, please.”

“Tell me your true name, and I will.”

“Very well.” Rupert clears his throat. “It's Shaelevarthra.”

The King nearly chokes on his rage. “Don't speak it where everyone can hear, you fool! You will tell it only to me, or I'll have to kill anyone who overhears it. Lucky for everyone in this room, you told me a lie just now. And before you continue spouting more lies, know that Lady Kessalif began doing research on your kind the moment she suspected an Elf was involved. We weren't sure if you were full-blooded or half, so we made a contingency plan for both scenarios.”

The King sounds like a warrior now, like a general. A man of battle and brawn, but a politician as well. A dangerous combination.

“So you know everything about my people, and about true names?” Rupert asks hoarsely. “I thought you humans had erased Elvish lore from your books, your schools, and your libraries. Our history and habits aren't interesting enough or important enough to be included, yes? That's the view your father and grandfather took, anyway.”

To my surprise, the King's shoulders stiffen, and he clears his throat as if he's buying himself time to answer. "We still have some records."

"Then you know that a Half-Elf, bound by their true name, must obey any command given by their master. They may not speak their own name to anyone once they are bound. And the only way to break such a bond is for another person to speak the Half-Elf's true name in the presence of both the Half-Elf and the master, whereupon ownership transfers to the new master, and the old one may not reclaim it, no matter how many times he says the name."

"Yes, yes," says the King impatiently.

"And you know," continues Rupert, his voice thin and cracked, "that if the master of a bound Half-Elf dies, the Half-Elf will perish as well."

I hold my breath for a long moment, shocked by this revelation.

Once Rupert is bound to King Falron, even if I manage to kill the King, Rupert will die, too.

"Don't do it!" I cry out desperately. "Whatever they do to me, don't give them your—"

"Silence her!" barks the King.

The next second my jaws are pried apart by rough hands, and a wad of cloth is wedged into my mouth. I try to spit it out, but they place a gag over my lips and knot it at the back of my skull, so all I can do is vent muffled screams through the coarse fabric.

I had no idea the true names of Half-Elves were so dangerous—which makes me even more heartsick because I think Rupert was on the verge of giving me his true name at least once. The mere idea that he would trust me with that much power over him makes me want to cry.

"She's yours, Magden," the King says.

A man steps forward from the shadowy corner of the torture chamber. His face has been painted thickly in greasy streaks of black and red, and he holds a thin, crooked blade in

his hand. The guards who bound and gagged me withdraw quickly, as if they're wary of him.

At a nod from the King, the torturer steps forward and sets the toothlike tip of the blade to my breastbone.

"Stop," Rupert gasps again. "I'll tell you, I swear."

"Given your first attempt at deception just moments ago, I think I should demonstrate how serious I am about this," the King replies smoothly. "Continue, Magden."

The blade carves a jagged line down my sternum, then swings around to slit the heavy flesh along the underside of my left breast. I breathe through the pain—breathe and breathe, but I do not scream. I refuse to scream.

The torturer's painted face tilts, as if my tenacity surprises him. But before I have a chance to steel myself, he sidesteps, seize my right hand, and digs the flat tip of the knife under the nail of my little finger.

I start to scream—but I catch myself and I shut down my throat, screaming inside my head rather than letting the sound burst through the gag. I scream numbers, counting to calm myself as the pain spikes, then ebbs a little. I can't see Rupert now, I'm staring at the ceiling, focused on the dark stone high above my face.

There's a clank of metal being discarded, the scrape of another tool being picked up. The torturer clamps my smallest fingernail in the grip of the new tool, and with a wrenching pull, he yanks the nail out of its bed.

It feels as if my finger has been torn apart.

I can't hold back any longer.

I scream.

Rupert is roaring at the King, or trying to, even though his voice is still hoarse and weak.

"Stop!" he pleads. "Stop, for the goddess's sake!"

"Proceed, Magden," says the King calmly. "You know where to cut next."

The torturer's attention shifts to the space between my legs.

No no no no no oh goddess no...

The torturer selects a pair of sharp clippers. Then his gloved hand reaches toward my pussy.

Rupert screams. “Fucking stop! I’ll tell you, I swear I’ll tell you, please, please—”

“Wait, Magden,” says the King.

The torturer withdraws his hand, and I lie there panting, teeth clamped on the gag, tears oozing hot from the corners of my eyes.

“This is just a taste of what she will endure if you lie to me again.” The King’s voice is smug, oily. Satisfied.

“I won’t lie,” Rupert promises. “But there is only one way I’ll yield my secret, one bargain I will make with you.”

I turn my head so I can see Rupert and the King again, in their chairs on the platform.

“Amusing that you think you have any leverage with which to bargain,” says the King.

“You’re a busy man,” Rupert replies. “You want this done quickly. So do I. And you saw through my tricks, so I know you’re too smart to pass up a good deal.”

Lady Kessalif was the one who perceived the truth, but Rupert is playing to the King’s ego. A smart move.

“I am not easily fooled,” says the King. “Speak your terms, Half-Elf.”

“Like all deals made with the Kin, this one is binding, and if either of us breaks it, that man’s life is forfeit. You can have my name, on these terms: let Juliette leave, unharmed, free to go where she pleases, along with her friends from the House of Bounty. If you agree to do this, I will give you my name, and the moment you speak it, I will be yours—and not only my magic. I’ll serve you in everything, and I’ll follow your every command. I’ll spin you such mountains of gold that you’ll be able to climb up and gild the stars themselves. Your reign will be renowned, and your empire will be endless. But if another person speaks my name aloud, in your presence and mine, your

control over me will end, and I will serve them instead. Do we have a bargain?”

The King hesitates, probably considering the deal from every angle. “Who else knows your true name?”

“No one but the father who gave it to me. He put the name into my mind when I was three years old, then swore that the day he spoke the name of his bastard offspring would be the day he died. He vowed it to the goddess, and he will keep that vow on pain of his own death.”

“Good.” The King rubs his hands together. “Then we have a deal.”

“Your word has bound you,” says Rupert. “Take care that you do not break it, and thus seal your own fate.”

“No chance of that.” The King chuckles. “I intend to keep you as my slave for a very, very long time and find many satisfying uses for you. Guards, take the woman to the House of Bounty and see that she and her friends leave at once. They are to be expelled from the gates naked, unharmed by the hand of anyone within the palace. Understood?”

“Naked?” Rupert exclaims.

“They may go free and unharmed from this place, but they are nothing, and they possess nothing,” says the King. “Let them fend for themselves as they may. Come now—we’ll find a quiet place to be alone, you and I. You can tell me your name, and begin your dutiful service to me.”

His thick, lecherous tone makes me want to scream again and flail against my chains in a frenzy of panic. But I don’t move. I must not draw attention to myself or anger the King any further. I know how business and bargains work—this is the delicate moment just before the agreement is sealed, and I must not interfere.

Once I’m free and out of this palace, I’ll begin to strategize. Because there’s no fucking way I’m leaving Rupert in the King’s power for one second longer than I have to.

Rupert is hustled away, and the King glances at me one last time before following him out. He gives me a smile full of

triumph and obscene intent.

Still I do not move or challenge him with my eyes, even though my mind is screaming *Don't touch him, don't touch him, don't you dare touch him* over and over.

When the King disappears, the torturer slinks back into his corner and the guards approach to remove the gag and unlock my cuffs. There's blood between my breasts, blood trickling over my belly, blood dripping from my wounded finger. When I sit up, the bruises on my body scream in protest. But the pain is fuel, the pain is power—I rise, and I give the torturer one fierce look before I'm escorted from the room by the guards.

Sending me bruised, naked, and bleeding into the House of Bounty is a statement from the King, a warning to the other women. He's letting me go—for now—but I'm not such a fool as to believe he won't send guards after me tonight or tomorrow. I'm *nothing*, like he said. I'm no one. I'll stumble out into the royal city, naked and helpless, with no money or protection—and if I survive the first several hours of freedom, he'll make sure I disappear. Rupert didn't specify how long the King had to leave me unharmed once he let me go. It's a loophole that a more analytic mind would have spotted.

“The King said you're to leave with your friends,” says one of the guards. “What are their names? You can wait in the courtyard and we'll send them out to you.”

I almost say Shenya and Nerith, and perhaps Bede, my maid—but then I stop myself, because an idea sparks in my mind. A strategy, a scheme. Another loophole, one that the King didn't see.

“I want to speak to them face to face,” I say. “Otherwise they may not choose to come with me.”

The guard hesitates, but his companion says, “The concubines are having luncheon in the garden, I believe. It's as convenient a place as any. And this will be a good chance to communicate the King's message about what happens to intractable whores.”

“Fine,” the other concedes.

They march me through the House. As we pass through one hallway, I notice Bede shrinking against the wall, her eyes wide and tortured as the soldiers escort me past her. I give a little jerk of my head, an indication for her to follow us. I hope she has the courage to follow, but I don't dare look behind to see if she understood my silent message.

The guards and I burst through the doors into the sunlit garden, onto the terrace where beautifully-clad women with perfectly coiffed hair sit at small tables, daintily plucking at the scanty fare they're allowed to consume.

Faces turn toward me. Eyes widen beneath coal-black lashes, lips part in surprise or tighten with suppressed emotion.

I almost smile, because I see what I was looking for in all those faces. There are a few things in this world that can summon and unite all women of every age, color, and background—and the brutal abuse of a cruel man is one of them.

For all his experience with war, control, and aggressive political tactics, the King is laughably inept in one area.

He does not understand women.

I step forward, arms spread. I am naked and bruised but I am not cowed—not one bit.

“My name is Juliette. I lied to His Majesty,” I say simply, clearly. “I'm being sent away in disgrace, but the King, in his mercy, has decreed that I may take my friends with me. They will be stripped as well and sent out naked from the House of Bounty, with no possessions, not even the clothes on their backs. But we have the King's word that we may pass into the city unharmed. So I am here to ask my friends if they will stand up, right now, and come with me into the city, so that all may see the evidence of His Majesty's great mercy.”

The guards on either side of me stir uncomfortably, and one of them starts to speak, but he seems unsure what to say. After all, I merely relayed the King's message.

“Will my friends stand,” I repeat, “and will they come with me?”

Silence hovers like the glimmering sunlight. The concubines on the terrace do not move—it's as if the King has transmuted them himself, from flesh into stone. Or perhaps they have transformed themselves, for their own protection.

Just as I'm about to give up hope, a metal chair scrapes on the stone pavers.

Shenya rises. Her lips are trembling, but her voice is clear. "I am your friend, Juliette. I will come with you."

She slides the light gown she's wearing off her shoulders, lets it slip to the ground. Her corset comes off next, and her underwear.

With hiss of fierce breath, Nerith leaps up too. "I am your friend, Juliette" she says, her gaze meeting mine. "I'll come with you." But on the last few words, her glance veers to Shenya. She strips quickly, tearing off her clothing, baring her long, gorgeous body.

"Very well." One of the guards at my side clears his throat. "Let's go—"

But two more chairs grate across the pavers, and two more women rise. "We are also friends of Juliette. We are going with her."

"Wait a moment," exclaims the guard. "That's not—"

But he's too late. A smile spreads over my face and warmth surges in my heart as more women rise, one after another, shedding the finery of the King and stepping forward in just their skin—skin of all colors and kinds, sleek and lumpy, scarred and smooth, freckled and flawless.

"I'm a friend of Juliette."

"Juliette and I are friends."

"I'm leaving with my friend."

When Rupert said "friends," he meant Shenya, and perhaps Nerith. And that's what the King assumed as well. Those two lonely men could not imagine the joint power of a group of women, the sisterhood that can form through shared trauma, within the span of a few days or a few moments.

I'm giving these women a choice. A chance. And they're taking it.

There's only a handful of guards nearby, and none of them seem to know what to do as dozens of women strip naked and step out of their discarded silks and satin. Jewels rain onto the pavers, pins fly from unbound hair. Nerith pitches her shoes into a hedge, and several others follow her example.

"What have you done?" exclaims one of the guards beside me, grabbing my arm.

I give him a withering look. "Easy there. My friends and I are to be sent away unharmed, remember? If you have a problem with that, take it up with His Majesty."

"I'll do just that," he snarls, and he races off, while his companion protests loudly at being left alone.

"Guards," I call out. "Do your duty to the King and escort me and my friends to the palace gates, if you please."

It's comical how the guards stammer curses and shout confused questions at each other, while I turn slowly around and head back through the house, with every potential bride following in my wake.

In the hallway stands Bede, stripped of her maid's uniform, a thatch of dark hair between her thin legs and her arms wrapped around herself.

"I'm glad you're joining me, friend." I put my arm through hers, and she relaxes, matching my stride as we lead the crowd of women to the front entrance.

Venedict is there, clad in his garish finery, with half a dozen House guards at his back. At first I think he's planning to stop us, and I meet his gaze head on, with as much calmness and strength as I can summon, my head held high.

Venedict Luron, Steward of the House, looks into my eyes, and a flare of vindictive triumph shoots through his gaze.

In that moment I understand that the King has wronged him, too. And he never forgot, and he never forgave.

The steward steps back with a nod and a half-bow. "It is the King's wish. May the goddess bless you and your friends. You

are fortunate to have so many.”

“There’s always room for more,” I tell him.

But he only gives me a stiff, sad nod, withdrawing another step. “Some opportunities come too late.”

With another bow, he lets us pass. The guards behind him mutter to each other, but none of them try to stop us.

People gather as we cross the courtyard, headed for the palace gates. Servants, stable-boys, guards, visitors, nobles, even a cluster of people in robes who appear to be a foreign delegation pause to stare at our procession.

I can’t think about the fact that dozens of people are seeing my breasts and my genitals right now. I can’t think about what Rupert might be enduring as he makes his deal with the King. This is the only way out—the only path to save us both.

The mass exodus of the concubines from the House of Bounty is about their freedom, of course, but it’s about more than that. If I’d gone out alone, or with a couple others, we’d have been an oddity, true—but we’d have been more easily overlooked and more quickly forgotten. Once I bargained or begged for some clothing, I’d be invisible again—unknown except to the soldiers the King would surely send after me.

Now, everyone will know who I am. They’ll observe my face as I lead the women through the city, and they’ll remember it. They’ll see on my body the marks of what the King did to me—they’ll hear that he promised me safe passage. As long as I stay in the public eye, the King won’t be able to touch me without showing everyone that his promise counts for nothing.

He stole us from our villages swiftly, had us transported to his wretched House inside closed carriages, treated us like stolen goods, like chattel... but now his treatment of us is on full display, as is the fact that every one of us would rather parade naked through the city streets than spend another minute as his concubine.

My heart is crying for Rupert, but I can’t let myself think about him yet. I stay firmly in the moment, seeking out the guard with the highest rank when we reach the main gates of the

palace. A captain, judging by the embellishments on his uniform.

I hold his gaze as we approach. “The King has promised me and my friends safe passage, as long as we take nothing with us,” I call out.

One of my original pair of guards is still straggling along with us, and when the captain looks to him for confirmation, he gives an exasperated nod. “It’s true. I heard the order myself. And Lord Venedict let them leave the House of Bounty, so...” He throws up both hands, shaking his head.

The gate guards converse rapidly with each other in low tones... but the gates are standing open already, probably for a delivery of some sort—so I forge ahead without waiting, waving my crowd of sisters onward.

As we pass through the gates, Nerith lifts her hands, and the stone turns momentarily translucent, its crystal planes shattering the sunlight into a thousand rainbows that carpet the cobblestone street before us. The effect only lasts a few moments, but it’s enough to inspire the other women. One of the girls grows violets from her hands and plucks each one, tossing them into the air—another creates the illusion of tiny iridescent butterflies dancing over our heads, and a third makes her hair grow longer and longer, a sheet of glorious gold trailing covering her body and trailing behind her. Nature gifts seem to be preeminent among the group—small, simple things like creating mist, shifting light, enticing plants to bloom as we pass—stirring up the breeze so that it rushes through our hair, warming the air so it breathes with delicate softness over our bare skin.

We are a mob, a flood, an army of goddesses marching the gates, and the soldiers yield, withdrawing as we flow through. Arm in arm with Bede, I lead them all down the broad street, past shops and eateries, past merchants and families, past gawking citizens whose numbers seem to thicken every minute. Carriages halt to watch us pass, carts and horses pull up short, wheelbarrows thunk to the ground as their owners stop to stare.

Shenya and Nerith are right behind me, and as we walk, Bede lets out a wild shout, a burst of wordless joy at being free

from the House. The other women join in a victorious cry that echoes through the square we're crossing.

And then, soft and plaintive, Shenya begins to sing.

It's a song I've heard before, a folk ballad my mother used to sing, and my heart swells up when I hear it—swells up so tight I can barely breathe.

Bede wraps her other hand over mine where it rests on my arm. She and I can't sing—her from physical inability and me from emotion—but our sisters use their voices on our behalf. The afternoon light slants yellow between the shops and tenement houses, and the rays turn the cobblestones to glinting gold. And their voices are gold, heavy and rich and glowing with liberty, with strength.

In this moment, everything is gold.

We walk through the city for two hours, fortified by water, wine, bread, and fruit offered up by kind citizens. There's an intensity in their eyes when they present the gifts—a desperate gratitude, a silent triumph. These people exist directly under the eye of the King, and their suffering has likely been greater than I'll ever know.

One woman steps into the flow of our group and moves with us for a few moments, speaking earnestly to me. “We heard the King had brought in bride candidates. Didn't know there were so many, or that he would treat you like this.” She glances at the bruises and blood mottling my skin. “My brother runs an inn at the edge of the city—you'll pass right by it if you keep heading south. You're welcome to stop there for rest and clothing before you leave. He can't take in everyone, but I'll spread the word to others in that area. We'll make sure you have clothing and shelter for the night.”

“Thank you.” I nod gratefully as she merges with the onlookers again.

Several minutes later, more of the King's guards show up. They don't stop our march, but they lurk along the edges of the street, shoving onlookers back and shouting for people to go back to their business.

I can sense uncertainty and fear rippling through the other concubines.

“Stay together, friends,” I call. “Heads high, arms linked!”

The guards’ presence is a sign that the King knows what’s happening. He has a choice to make now—he can arrest or slaughter us all, or he can let us continue shaming him, parading the bodies he was supposed to own through the streets.

I can see it now—all of us memorialized in history—the Slaughter of the Concubines. That would be his legacy forever—he’d never shake off the shadow of it. I’m betting everything on the fact that he won’t want a massacre of the kingdom’s gifted women on his record.

I’m taking another risk, too. The King might hurt Rupert more terribly because of what I’m doing—as some kind of punishment or vengeance. But he needs Rupert, his new Half-Elf toy, his gold mine. I’m betting on the King’s greed to conquer his need for petty revenge—a revenge I won’t even see.

It’s a risk more vital and meaningful than any gamble my brother ever made.

Giltos is a huge, sprawling city, and we’re all barefoot, so our progress slows as feet become weary and bruised. But after what feels like an interminable trek between frenzied crowds of shouting citizens, I lift my gaze and see that at last, by the goddess’s grace, we’re nearing the edge of the city.

My responsibility to this group doesn’t end when the march does. A businesswoman is responsible for her employees, and a revolutionary is responsible for those who follow her, no matter how impulsively her revolution began.

I crane over my shoulder to speak to Shenya. “Pass the word along to the others. When we reach the wall, everyone should scatter into the streets. Stay in small groups and avoid the soldiers. There will be people ready to give you clothing and food. The faster you disappear, the better. The citizens will shelter us tonight, but after that, seek shelter with friends or relatives. Don’t return home, or the King’s guards will find you.”

“My family has influence,” Nerith adds. “I haven’t been allowed to contact them since I reached the House of Bounty, but I’ll send them a message so they’re informed about all of this. My father may not care, but my mother will be furious when she discovers how we’ve been treated. She’ll make sure my father talks to the other nobles and holds the King accountable.”

I nod to her and face forward, striding ahead with renewed energy.

The King is a master of concealing truth, spreading misinformation, confusing the true story. It’s the only conceivable way he’s been able to keep the rest of the kingdom so oblivious to his true nature. Our communication network in Darthage is notoriously underfunded and unreliable, and it functions primarily under royal control. Steal the truth from people, corrupt their sources of news, and you rob them of their ability to make wise, well-informed choices.

But that doesn’t matter now. The King’s conscription of potential brides backfired on him—created a swarm of witnesses to his cruelty from nearly every city and village in the entire kingdom. He can’t get away with it. Not this time.



THE TRICKSTER

Pain.

Everything is pain. I'm not even sure where it begins or ends. I can't identify the parts of my body that hurt, because everything hurts.

When I told my name to the King, I felt the bond between us slam into place, a horrific weight on my shoulders, a vise clamping around my very soul.

He commanded me to kiss him, and I did.

He ordered me to unfasten his pants and take out his cock. I did.

His next order would have been worse. But a wave of nausea shuddered through me and I vomited, all over his exposed dick, his pants, and his fine shoes.

"It's the loss of my energy," I rasped. "I'm weak. I need rest."

I couldn't sit up any longer—I collapsed just as he began to kick me with his vomit-covered boots. I think he believed me though, because after thrashing me soundly, he called servants

and ordered them to take me away, clean me up, and put me to bed.

He won't risk molesting me until I'm recovered. At least, I hope not.

If he does, I'll endure it, just as Juliette would have endured his invasion of her body. I hope I can be as brave as she would have been.

Barely conscious, I lie under clean sheets in a dark, silent room, unable to move without agony. Breathing hurts. Thinking hurts. My very existence is pain.

I wish I could heal faster. I wish I had deeper reserves of magic instead of this shallow pool.

An Elder once told me that the Elves have a sister race among the realms—a race called the Fae. They occupy a lush, beautiful realm called Faerie—a place of exquisite loveliness and terrifying monsters. They live longer than we do and have more powerful, versatile magic. Some of them have wings, horns, or other animal parts. As a child, I used to wish I could be one of them—more powerful than anyone in this world, Elf or human.

As I lie helpless, my mind drifts to my childhood dreams of being Fae. I would have wings, horns, and claws. I would be magnificent and beautiful, with enough power to transform fields of hay into gold with one wave of my hand. Enough power to protect myself and the woman I love.

Tears drip from the corners of my eyes onto the pillow.

Is Juliette alright? Did they really let her go? They must have, because even for a Half-Elf, bargains have power, and I made sure my deal with the King was an official agreement before the goddess. I have to trust that she will strike the King down if he breaks his word.

I review the deal in my mind, every bit of the wording. I wasn't specific about the "friends" she could take with her—hopefully the King won't find a way to get out of that. She won't leave if she thinks the King will take out his rage on her friends once she's gone.

I said he must let her leave unharmed—but I didn't say forever. I should have specified that he had to leave her alone *for good*. Fuck me. *Fuck*. I'm such an idiot.

A twitch in my mind distracts me from my self-hatred. The spell between me and Rupert—the one that made me look like him to anyone who knew his face—is broken now, but a flimsy thread of awareness wavers between us. It will dissipate moments after he wakes up—and I can feel him waking up right now.

Since I didn't end the spell properly, there's a chance he will retain fragments of my thoughts, especially from the times when I invaded his mind for information. I can only hope he understands why I used his face and his life.

I suppose my current status as the King's slave is a fitting punishment for what I did.

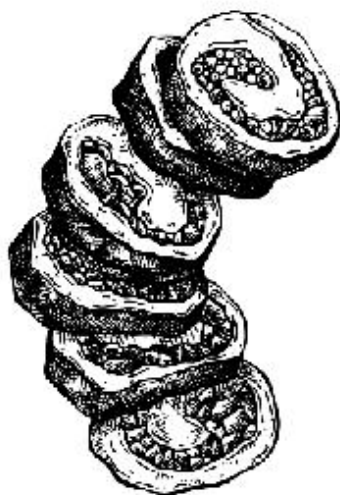
Fuck, before Juliette I never would have felt guilty about shit like this.

Ah, Rupert Diggs is awake now. I can sense the echo of his alarm, his confusion, his anger... and then the thread of our connection dissolves and there is nothing.

The King's servants took everything I owned—my clothes, my prized boots, Juliette's notebook, my magical supplies—everything.

And with Rupert's waking, the last trace of my time with Juliette is gone.

Once again, I am alone.



JULIETTE

I'm huddled in a thick blanket, on a bench beside a fireplace big enough for five grown men to stand inside it. The babble of the inn's common room pummels my head, vibrating through the plans I'm trying to formulate.

A glossy ceramic mug warms my palms, the steam floating upward from the tea and heating my face. I stare into the brown liquid, imagining a rugged, handsome face, brown hair that always sticks straight up, and blue eyes with a teasing twinkle.

Fuck.

I made my grand gesture. I used the King's bargain against him and got all the potential brides out of the House of Bounty. We're relatively safe now, intermingling with the people of Giltos. When we reached the last street before the wall, we split into groups and the citizens surrounded us immediately, enfolding us in cloaks and hustling us away from the guards and into buildings. It couldn't have gone more smoothly if I'd planned it for days in advance.

Luck and a shrewd scheme got us out, secured the people's sympathy, and temporarily protected us from the King. From

now on, the other women are on their own. I have an enslaved Half-Elf to liberate and a king to kill.

Of course, I can't kill the King until I find Rupert's true name and free him from the King's control. And there's no way to discover that name, since I will never be allowed anywhere near the palace again.

What if I create a disguise, get into the palace somehow, and stand outside Rupert's cell, or his room, or the King's chambers—wherever Rupert is—and shout names until I land on the right one?

That's the stupidest plan I've ever concocted. Maybe the stupidest plan *anyone* has ever concocted. There are thousands of names in the world, not to mention all the Elvish names I've never heard. I could never try them all.

There's only one other person alive who knows Rupert's name. His father. He has vowed never to speak it—but maybe he could write it down for me.

His father. A full-blooded Elf, who lives in Riddenwold with the rest of the Withdrawn, in some secret location hidden from all humans. I've heard that when a human enters an Elven sanctuary, they are killed, imprisoned, or subjected to memory erasure and sent away.

Not that I have to worry about losing my memories, because I don't even know where to start looking.

“Juliette?”

I look up from my drink to find an unfamiliar woman watching me, curiosity and purpose in her eyes. “I'm Mistress Moore. I'm a cook in the House of Bounty. I've had some dealings with Rupert—that is to say, the one who was pretending to be Rupert.” She shakes her head, half-smiling. “I have friends in the palace, and they passed word to me of what happened. I'm sorry for your pain, and his. The Half-Elf is a decent sort.”

“He is,” I manage in a choked voice.

“May I sit?” She points to a spot on the bench beside me.

“Of course.” I lift the tea to my lips, but I barely taste the sip. Everything seems tasteless and hollow and *useless* unless it’s connected to rescuing him.

“The real Rupert Diggs woke up from your Half-Elf’s spell.” Mistress Moorne settles herself on the bench and plops a large, lumpy canvas bag onto her lap. “He came to me right away. I guess he remembered some of what passed between their two minds when the spell was active. He couldn’t recall everything, but he said your Half-Elf planned to help us with a certain project.” She eyes me, as if trying to gauge how much I already know.

I nod. “I know what you were planning. The fennisley.”

“Yes, well... Rupert Diggs says that your Half-Elf went to the supplier for the fennisley, but we don’t know whether he managed to get it or not.”

“He did,” I assure her. “He laid the spell on it, too.”

Her sharp eyes light up. “Do you have any idea where he might have hidden it?”

“I’m afraid not. Maybe in his room? Somewhere on his person?”

“That’s what we thought, too. I searched his room, and I had one of my boys track down where they threw his personal things, his clothes and boots and such. They dumped everything into one of the dust bins. They’d gone through his pockets, but my boy managed to salvage his boots and this notebook. The notebook seems to be yours, and the boots... well, I thought you might want them. I suspect they’re Elven-made.”

She opens the drawstring mouth of the bag on her lap and pulls out a familiar pair of boots and an even more familiar notebook. She sets them on the bench between us.

The notebook is indeed mine, and the boots—

Elven-made... yes... Elven-made by friends of his in Lensterhaven... friends who would know exactly where the Elves’ sanctuary is.

“Mistress Moorne,” I say. “I could kiss you right now, I’m that grateful.”

She chuckles. “Well, dear, I’m not sure why you should be so grateful—I’ve brought you nothing but these. We’ll keep looking for the—you know.” She gives me a significant look. “And we’ll use it if we find it.”

“No, don’t!” I exclaim. At her warning look, I lower my voice to a whisper. “Don’t get rid of *anyone* yet. You may have heard that to arrange my freedom, the Half-Elf had to yield the King his name and vow his service. I need to learn his true name and free him from his bond with the King. Otherwise when the King dies, he will die, too.”

She surveys me shrewdly. “You love him, this nameless trickster.”

“Yes.” The word lurches from me, a truth vital as blood or breath. “Yes, I do.”

“Very well. I can give you one week before we act, but no longer than that. We’re grateful for what you’ve done today. You’ve strengthened our cause against the King, and if we act soon, the people will rise with us. We cannot wait long, or this fervor will fade, and the citizens will return to their sad complacency.”

“You don’t speak like a cook,” I tell her. “You speak like a leader.”

She smiles placidly. “I’ve had many years of experience ruling over a kitchen. Just because a woman is a cook doesn’t mean she can’t be educated, intelligent, and ambitious. Just like some bakers I know.” She gives me a wink. “One week. Then I must give the order, and my people will take action. The yeast has been added, and the dough will rise.”

“One week isn’t enough time.”

Her pleasant face hardens a little as she stands, clutching the empty canvas bag. “It’s all the time I can give you. Others are suffering, even as we speak, and the longer we wait, the more difficult and bloody the coup will be. The life of one Half-Elf is not worth more than the lives of my followers, or the lives of the people in this city.”

“I know that,” I choke out. But what I really want to scream is that *yes, yes, his life is worth more than anyone else’s.*

He is worth every soul in the world.

It's not true, and I feel guilty for thinking it, but it *feels* true. Faced with his death, or the death of everyone else in this kingdom, I know what I *should* choose. I also know who I'd *want* to choose.

The cook is turning away, but she hesitates. "The folk here gave you clothes, yes? Did they offer you a room for the night?"

"Yes, on both counts."

"A word of advice—don't sleep in this city. Go to the northwestern canal gate, a few blocks from here, and ask for Jerrod. If you try to leave by any other gate, you'll be stopped."

"What about the other girls?"

"Most of them should be able to leave tomorrow, if they're quiet and clever about it. But everyone knows your face now. You led the march out of the palace, and while that notoriety might give you a little protection for a while, it won't last. Get out tonight and get clear of the city as fast as you can." She puckers her mouth, then reaches into her pocket. "Your hand, girl."

I transfer my tea to one hand and hold out the other. She places several coins into my palm. "For travel."

"Thank you," I murmur.

"Think nothing of it. I wish you the blessing of the Goddess." With a final nod, she hurries away.

Bede approaches, casting a wary glance at the cook's departing figure. She's carrying two bowls of stew, one of which she holds out to me.

"Thank you." I set down the tea, pocket the coins, and accept the food. Though I don't feel hungry, I should eat something if I'm going to travel anywhere tonight. Determined, I shove a spoonful of stew into my mouth.

Bede sits down as well and begins to eat. She makes some odd noises during the process, and I become painfully aware of how much I use my tongue to manage and manipulate food when I'm chewing and swallowing. The King took not only her powers of speech, but her ability to enjoy a good meal, too. It's

such a basic human pleasure, and it makes me furious that she'll never experience food the same way again.

"Can you taste anything?" I ask.

She manages to swallow, then holds up her forefinger and thumb, slightly apart. *A little.*

As the Mistress Moorne said, people like Bede are suffering beneath the King's terrible rule every day. Who am I to ask them to suffer longer so I can rescue Rupert? The King could do so much damage in a couple of weeks. Who knows how many of the remaining maids and House staff he will punish cruelly, out of pure spite, because his collection of concubines has escaped his grasp?

Yet I can't persuade myself to let the uprising happen *now*, to give up on Rupert altogether. He never gave up on me, even before he really knew me—even with all the risks.

I have to do this. I have to try.

"As soon as I'm done eating, I have to go," I tell Bede quietly. "I have to leave the city tonight. There's something I have to do... a journey I must take."

Bede taps her chest, nodding quickly at me.

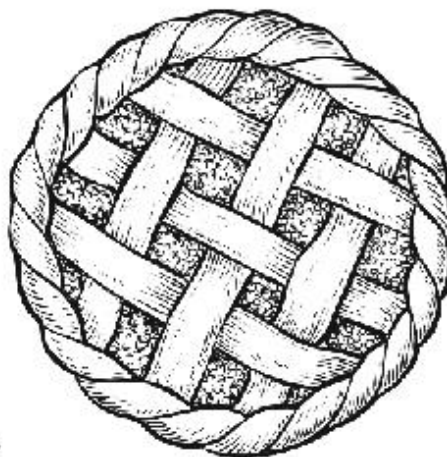
"You want to come?"

Again she nods.

"It's going to be dangerous. A hard journey, with an uncertain end."

She raises both eyebrows and tilts her chin down, looking at me so insistently that I chuckle a little.

"Fine, you can come along," I tell her. "I'll teach you more Elvensign on the way."



JULIETTE

Getting out of the city isn't difficult, thanks to the cook's direction and her rebel friend at the canal gate. But there are no carriages or horses to be hired at this time of night, so Bede and I spend a harrowing several hours walking through the tufted grass by the side of the road, with only faint moonlight to illuminate the way. I've never done such a thing, and I'm sure we'll be waylaid by bandits or captured by soldiers long before we reach the next town. I'm glad of Bede's silent presence. If I were alone, I don't think I could manage the trek without breaking down.

Blisters form on our feet from the ill-fitting footwear we were gifted. Halfway through the night, I switch my clogs for Rupert's boots.

But despite the darkness, the blisters, and my fear, we make it to the next village and hire a pair of horses. Then comes the day-long ride to Lensterhaven, with more chafing and blisters, particularly along my inner thighs. Whenever I feel like complaining about it, I think of Rupert and what he might be enduring at the King's hands. My grief and anger over his fate

stirs me up, carries me through the physical discomfort and the hours of riding.

We arrive at Lensterhaven too late to enter the town—the gates have already been shut for the night. But the transport service from which we hired the horses has a station outside the wall, so we pause there first to return our mounts. The manager checks the horses over and proclaims them in decent shape. I'm relieved that he doesn't require any additional fees, because I have just enough money left for one room at a shabby inn and a meager breakfast for Bede and me.

We have nothing but the clothes on our backs, but when we arrive on foot at the tiny inn near the transport station, the innkeeper takes pity on us and gives us a bar of soap, several clean handkerchiefs, and a bag of clothes and personal items that guests left behind. We claim what we can use and return the rest the next morning, after better sleep than I expected. I suppose I was so weary from travel that not even my anxiety about Rupert could keep me awake.

When we leave the inn, we find the gates of Lensterhaven wide open, admitting farmers with produce carts, traveling merchants, fishmongers, and a few travelers like ourselves. No one asks our business as we enter the town.

It's a bustling place, with narrow buildings crammed against each other along crooked streets. I suppose it sees plenty of traffic since it's so near Giltos.

Now we must visit all the shoe shops, Bede signs to me. She has become an expert in Elvensign during our journey, and I've gained a fresh appreciation for her quick mind. The King had no idea what a treasure he'd relegated to maid-service. The speed with which she learned not only the signs for letters, but a vast quantity of words, is nothing less than a marvel. She would have been an asset to any court or household, and yet he had her changing linens and doing hair for his concubines. There is dignity in such work, of course—yet I can't help believing Bede is capable of far more.

“Yes, we'll have to check every cobbler and shoe shop,” I admit. “Rupert never told me the names of his friends, only that they were a pair of Elvish women masquerading as human.”

As luck would have it, there's a cobbler on the main street. It's run by an elderly gentleman, so it's not the place we're looking for—but as soon as I ask him about a married pair of skilled shoemakers, both women, he nods knowingly. “You want Enthel and Lannau of the ‘Jig and Heel,’” he says. “Down through the town center, across the bridge, take the second left and then a right. They're the fourth shop on the left.”

“Thank you.” I hesitate, wishing I had something to give him for his help, but all I have is one coin, and we need that to fill our empty stomachs.

The old cobbler nods kindly and returns to prying the nails out of the sole of a worn shoe, while Bede and I leave his shop. We pause at a food stall on the street corner and exchange our last coin for a pair of boiled eggs and two small buttered buns, which we eat as we walk.

By the time we've devoured our breakfast and licked our fingers, we're within sight of the shop the old man mentioned—the “Jig and Heel.” Its sign is two smart leather boots, angled as if they're dancing.

It's early, but the shops along the street are beginning to open. A-frame signs are set out, doors are propped wide, proprietors step out to sweep their doorsteps and call greetings to each other. It's a fresh, clear morning, with the kiss of an early fall chill.

“I love the turning of the seasons,” I murmur. “I've never had a favorite season, really. I prefer the phases in between, the shift from winter to spring and summer to fall.”

I've always liked winter, signs Bede. I like bundling up. Being cozy.

“Baking is always best in cool weather,” I admit. “I can't wait until I can do it again. What do you think you'll do, now that you're free?”

Come with you, she replies.

I wince. “We talked about this on the journey here. I'm going to the Elvish sanctuary, and it's going to be dangerous. There's a chance I won't make it out alive, or with my memories intact. You shouldn't come with me.”

She stops in her tracks and signs one long word, letter by letter. *Nevertheless. I will come.*

The determination in her eyes makes my throat tighten. I can barely manage to say, “Very well. If that’s what you want.”

It is.

We keep walking, approaching the “Jig and Heel.” Now that we’re closer, I can tell the sign is two ladies’ boots, each designed in a different style, yet dancing together—a symbol of the pair that runs the shop. It reminds me of Shenya and Nerith.

When our group of defiant women split up at the wall, we were separated, and I haven’t seen either of them since. I can only hope they found a safe place to rest, that they’re able to consummate the longing I’ve seen between them, and that Nerith can contact her father and begin the process of alerting the nobility to how the concubines were being treated. The King may have been able to hide, sidestep, or explain away what he was doing until now, but with so many witnesses unleashed and given a voice, there’s no way of keeping a lid on the truth this time. At least, I hope not. I lived for years in my village, oblivious to any political goings-on, caring very little about the monarchy as long as the taxes on my business weren’t too prohibitive. I regret not learning more, or caring more.

Never again will I be so apathetic. From this point on, I will consider the political realities of the kingdom to be my business, not simply some distant machinations that have no real impact on my life. I have the responsibility to care about injustice and the abuse of power, even if the abuse is not being perpetrated directly against me.

We’re directly under the sign for the “Jig and Heel” now. Both of us pause, and Bede says, *You really think they will trust you with the location of the sanctuary?*

“I have no other choice,” I reply. “They are my only link to the Elves.”

Fortifying myself with a deep breath, I push through the shop door.

A bell tinkles as we enter. The place looks entirely normal—rows of angled wooden shelves lined with pairs of beautifully

crafted shoes, a few lamps with shades of colored glass, a worktable on which sit bins of tools and a couple of foot-shaped wooden forms.

The curvy woman behind the worktable looks normal too—except she’s staring at us with keen interest. Her eyes are amethyst, a purple so bright it’s right on the verge of glowing. Just like Rupert’s blue eyes.

She has an abundant cloud of bright red hair, so thick it’s impossible to see the tips of her ears. Her skin is dark and glossy, her lips full and painted vivid scarlet to match her hair.

Her gaze darts down, flitting over Bede’s borrowed shoes and latching onto my boots—well, Rupert’s boots.

“You.” She points a long, sharp-nailed finger at me. “Where did you get those? And how do you two know Elvensign?”

“Are you the one known as Enthel, or Lannau?”

“I’m Lannau. Who are you?”

I glance at Bede, and at her encouraging nod, I dive right into my tale. I explain everything, from my first meeting with Rupert by the fountain, to my brother’s lie and its consequences. I tell how Rupert saved me, and how he became enslaved to the Crown. I explain my plan—to learn his true name from his father and free him from the King’s control.

Sometime toward the beginning of my story I became conscious of another presence—a tall, pale woman with sleek dark hair and pierced brows. She glides up behind the first woman’s chair and remains there, one hand on her spouse’s shoulder, until I’ve finished my tale.

“I have to find the Elves quickly,” I explain. “Every day that passes is another day Rupert suffers at the hands of the King. You know the location of the Elven sanctuary—you can tell me where to go.”

Lannau shakes her head. “You’ll never find it. We could give you a map and it still wouldn’t help you. The place is concealed by layers of magic.”

“Then... can you take me there?” A note of desperate pleading enters my voice. “You’re Rupert’s friends, right?”

The two women exchange glances. “With us, he went by the name Rahndek. And yes, we’re his friends, I suppose. Though he did cheat us on the price of the boots. Three of the coins he paid with transformed from silver back into wood a few days later.”

“It’s a clever spell of his, really,” comments the tall woman, Enthel. “Turning chips of bark into coins. It’s undetectable even to our kind, until the enchantment wears off and the gold reverts back to its original shape and material.”

A bolt of horror races through my veins. “The transmutation is temporary?”

“Oh yes. It takes a vast amount of magic to transmute materials permanently—more magic than someone like Rahndek possesses.”

“We should have known better than to trust the Trickster,” her wife adds, with a wry smile. “Still, he’s a charming one. Lonely, you know? He’s got that puppyish look in his eyes, even when he’s being cocky.”

“Like he’s begging to be loved,” I say softly. “Like he wants you to ask him to stay.”

Enthel and Lannau look at each other, then at me. “Seems as though he got that first wish, eh?” Enthel says, smiling.

“I love him,” I say simply. “I don’t have money, but I’ll do anything to secure his freedom. I’ll give you anything you want, truly.”

Something sharp and hungry enters the gaze of the two Elvish women.

“Anything, you say?” murmurs Enthel.

“We’ve always wanted a child,” Lannau says. “Neither of us can carry one—we’re past the breeding age of Elves. And we’d prefer a child who wasn’t wholly human—one with some Elvish blood. You seem intelligent, healthy, and beautiful, and Rahndek is as clever as a male can be, as well as bold and handsome. It’s just the blend we’ve been looking for. We’ll help

you find the sanctuary, if you'll give us the first child you bear with Rahndek."

I'm speechless. Wordless.

Bede begins signing furiously at the Elves. *How can you ask that of her? It's absurd. It's monstrous. Surely there are foundlings you could take in, if you want children.*

The two of them ignore her, their gazes fixed on me.

Could I do it? Could I yield a child I haven't birthed yet, one I've never met? Could I give it to these two Elvish women, in exchange for the life and safety of the man I love?

He and I could have other children. Nine months of my life, and then I'd hand over the baby quickly and move on. I would never have to see it again. I could dissociate from it, I think—keep myself from becoming attached.

If I say no, and they refuse to help me, Rupert will remain in the King's power, suffering rape, beatings, and possible mutilation. He'll be forced to perform all sorts of wicked magic for the King—he'll probably have to kill people. And when the King finds out all the gold Rupert spun is temporary—he'll either murder Rupert outright or torture him as punishment.

Rupert is alive *right now*. Suffering *right now*. Surely I can trade his life for that of a child who doesn't exist... and might never exist.

"Is there anything else I can offer you?" My voice doesn't sound like mine—it's distant, hollow.

"Nothing," says Enthel.

"Returning to the Riddenwold is an unpleasant prospect for us," adds Lannau. "The only thing worth the effort would be a child—the kind of child we've been longing for. One with both human and Elvish blood. And we would treat it well, you may be assured of that. It would be our pride, our joy, our everything. It would lack nothing in love or comfort."

"I believe you," I say hoarsely.

Bede steps in front of me, signing even faster. *You can't be considering this. Don't do it. You'll regret it. I was forced to give away a child once—*

“I don’t have a choice,” I say through gritted teeth. “But let’s make it official, alright? A bargain that cannot be broken by either party. You will guide me to the sanctuary and help me find Rupert’s father—Rahndek’s father—and in exchange, I will give you my first child with him.”

“So if you never have children, we end up with nothing,” Lannau says.

“Those were *your* terms,” I remind her. Despite the quivering tension in my soul, I hold her gaze boldly.

She maintains the stare for a moment, then chuckles—but it’s a strained sound, with an ache of longing in it. “What’s life without a little risk? I’ll wager you and Rahndek will have children together. You seem like the type to want several of them.”

She’s not wrong. I’ve always dreamed of a large, merry family—five or six children running around, climbing into my lap, causing mischief and mayhem. Clever boys with Rupert’s blue eyes—diligent daughters whom I can teach to run a profitable business—yes, I want that someday. I want everything. And if I have to sacrifice my firstborn for everyone else...

Goddess, I don’t know if I can do this.

“Think on it, if you need to,” says Lannau. Her gaze is sympathetic on the surface, but there’s a ruthlessness beneath it. She wants the child as badly as I do, maybe more—wants it for her wife, for their joint happiness.

I can’t fault her for that, even though she’s asking me to make a terrible sacrifice.

When I think about the alternative... about leaving Rupert to suffer... it’s not even a question. I would do anything for him—even the most twisted, unthinkable things.

“We have a bargain,” I say.

Bede makes a faint sound of dismay in her throat.

The two Elvish women exchange glances. So much passes between them in those brief seconds—questions, affirmations, courage, excitement, love. It’s the language of long years in

each other's company, of two minds synchronized—unique, yet unified.

It strikes me suddenly that I'm making this bargain not only for myself, but on Rupert's behalf, too. The child would be his as well.

But he isn't here, and in his absence, with our offspring still a possibility rather than a reality, I need to make the best choice I can.

"We have a bargain," says Lannau, and Enthel clasps both hands over her heart, though her face remains pale and passive. "May the goddess strike down the one who breaks it."

"Let it be so," I confirm.



It's a relief not to worry about financing the journey. Enthel and Lannau take care of everything—purchasing and packing supplies, hiring a carriage to bring us as close to the Riddenwold as possible. Enthel buys Bede and me some clothes and shoes as well, though I opt for keeping Rupert's footwear. When I change into my new traveling outfit—a comfortable tunic, a corset-vest, and soft, pliant leather leggings—I transfer my notebook to the pocket of my leggings. I can't believe Rupert kept it, and I'm grateful he did. It contains my list of goals, as well as many of my notes regarding the function of the mill and bakery business. In the back, there are notes about the inn I'd like to run someday.

We set off the next morning, all four of us in a carriage, with our packs tied onto the roof. Since the two Elves don't seem very talkative, I take out my notebook and flip through it idly.

It's been a handful of days since I last looked at this notebook, but already I feel like a different person than I was

when I took down these notes, made these lists, and set these goals.

The book itself is different, too. Rupert has thrust a gold pin or needle into the leather and stitching of the book's spine. I have no idea what it is or why he put it here, but he travels light and I suspect everything he brings along has a purpose. For all I know, this is some kind of magic needle. I decide to leave it in place.

In addition to the needle, there's an odd thickness to the back cover, so I open the notebook to the last page and inspect the inner side of the leather cover. There's a faint rectangular lump, slightly smaller than the cover itself, as if someone slit the leather, stuffed something between the layers, and then sealed it back up. When I touch it, there's a faint hum under my fingers—the telltale vibration of magic.

Curiously I run my finger along the edges of the lump until I find a corner. There's a paper-thin layer of something that looks like leather, but isn't—the texture is different. And when I peel that layer slowly back, there's a slender wax-paper packet beneath. Through its translucent surface I can see choppy bits, like dried tea leaves.

There's a word written in miniscule script on the wax paper—*fennisley*.

This is it. This is where Rupert hid the charmed *fennisley*. A risky hiding place, I suppose, but then again, he didn't expect to be taken prisoner and enslaved. He wanted to keep the stuff on his person, yet concealed. He must have sealed it to the inside cover of my notebook with magic.

“What is that?” asks Enthel, and I startle a little. I was so immersed in my discovery I forgot I wasn't alone.

“Something I'll need later, when I kill the King,” I tell her.

She lifts her eyebrows, but doesn't question me further. Neither she nor her wife seem to care what happens to the monarchy of Darthage. They simply want to live and let live—a mindset I understand all too well.

As I turn the notebook over in my hands, my heart hollows out with sudden longing for Rupert. He clearly considered this a

prized possession, something to be cherished, even a place to tuck away small items of value. When I see him again I'll have to ask him why he kept it, and I'll have to investigate the purpose of the golden needle.

Cautiously I draw the pin out of the book's spine—and the second I do, Lannau straightens in the seat across from me, her gaze locked on the slim bit of gold. "What is that?"

"I'm not sure." I prod the tip with the pad of my thumb.

"Careful!" exclaims Lannau. "Give it here."

I hesitate, then hand it over. Lannau messes with the pin for a moment, muttering under her breath—and then with a flash of shining metal, the pin expands in size and a sword leaps into existence, nearly skewering Bede.

"By the goddess," Lannau breathes. "Axidor."

"Axidor?" I echo.

"The sword of Liacan, an Elvish warrior-priest, one of our most revered martyrs." She moves it a little, and both Bede and I cringe back in our seats.

"Fuck, it's incredible," says Lannau. "This isn't even its full length. For the true owner it can expand even longer and cast a few spells—temporary paralysis being one of them.

"It's valuable?" I ask.

"Valuable? Oh yes." Enthel reaches over to touch the sword reverently. "It has intrinsic, historical, and cultural value to our people. This is perhaps the most important sword ever crafted or wielded among Elvenkind."

"Why did Rupert have it?"

"I'm guessing he killed the owner," says Lannau. "Axidor must be won from its previous wielder in lethal combat. When I hold it, I feel its energy, but it doesn't connect with me. I can't wield any of its spells, or its full size. Which means it belongs to Rupert, and will be his until death."

Then Rupert didn't just find the dealer and pay for the fennisley... he *killed* the dealer.

It strikes me suddenly how little I know of him and his people—the Goddess-blessed Kin who adore nature, wield magic, and bargain with names and lives. And yet I know enough to be confident that Rupert is not a killer. If he fought to the death with the former owner of this blade, there must have been a good reason.

“He obtained the sword recently, I think,” Enthel murmurs. “If he’d possessed this blade for any length of time, he’d have taken it back to the sanctuary, and they would have hailed him as a hero and a lord of our people. It would be the one great feat he’s been looking for—a way to make them respect and accept him.” She lays gentle fingers on Lannau’s wrist. “Put it away, love, before you hurt someone.”

Reluctantly Lannau places her palm over the sword-tip, and after a moment’s hesitation, presses firmly. The sword shrinks back to the size of a needle, and she hands it to me.

“It reads the intent of the wielder,” she says. “If you’re using it for defense, it will cut and stab like any other blade. But if you wish it to shrink, it does.”

“Amazing.” Angling the pin, I cautiously twist the head of it and gasp as the sword appears in all its glory. As Lannau mentioned, when my fingers curl around the hilt, I can sense the weapon’s power. It is truly thrilling.

With a treasure like this in his hands, Rupert could have left Giltos. He could have departed for the sanctuary and claimed the approval of his father and the awe of the Elves.

But he didn’t. He returned to me.

“I’ve been wondering how I can persuade Rupert’s father to give me his true name,” I murmur, holding the sword nearer to the carriage window and admiring the play of light along the blade. “Maybe this will help. Rupert said his father vowed not to speak the name—”

“He vowed that? Before the goddess?” Lannau frowns, leaning forward. “You didn’t tell us that.”

“Yes, but I thought he could write it down for me, rather than speaking it aloud.”

“Well... that might work, depending on the wording of his original vow.” She leans back in her seat, mollified. “And yes—that sword will be most helpful in guaranteeing us safe passage into and out of the sanctuary.”

“They’ll take it from me?”

“Of course they will. It’s a priceless Elvish artifact, and it belongs with the Kin. But we can use it to win their goodwill.” Lannau nods, biting her lip. “We’ll say that you discovered the sword and wanted to deliver it to its rightful owners. You respect its cultural significance. We are your escorts, dedicated to ensuring the safe return of the sword. In gratitude, the Elders will offer you a boon, and you must word your request carefully.”

“Safe departure for me and for Bede, with our memories intact,” I say, “and Rupert’s true name. Do you know his father?”

“I met him once,” Enthel’s soft voice interposes. “He is the Prime Elder, Lord Argelos. Not his true name, of course, but his given name. He is as cold as ice in the dead of winter, and he hates humans more passionately than most Elves.”

“Yet he fucked one, apparently,” I point out.

“Perhaps that’s why he hates them.” Lannau fluffs her cloud of red curls. “Maybe Rahndek’s mother—sorry, *Rupert’s* mother—died, or rejected him, and his heartbreak incited the hatred.”

“Do most Elves hate humans?”

“Hate might be a strong word.” Lannau purses her lips. “I would say they dislike humans strongly. They view humans as careless with the earth, greedy for power and magic, cruel to each other, and chaotic in their society.”

They’re not wrong, Bede signs.

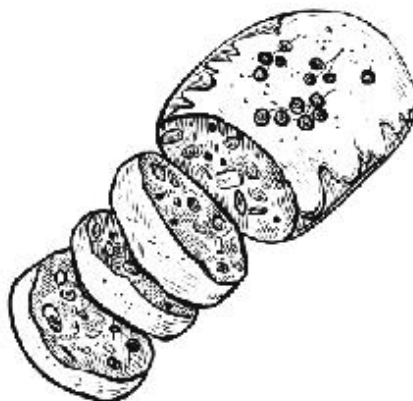
Pondering her words, I close the sword as Lannau did, insert the gold pin into the spine of the notebook again, and wedge it into my pocket, now fully aware of just how much value I’m carrying on my person.

I wish Rupert were here, so he could weigh in on the decisions I'm making. Not because I can't make them—I'm used to making decisions alone—but because the only leverage I have comes from things that belong to him, either in whole or in part. The sword—our future child.

Would he approve the gift of our firstborn to this couple, as the price of finding the Sanctuary?

Would he agree to the exchange of the sword for our welcome into the Elvish haven, and our safe departure once our business is done?

Does he believe I've left him alone, abandoned him to rot and to suffer in the King's grasp, while I run off and begin a new life on my own? Surely he knows I would never be so selfish. He must know I'll be back for him, no matter what it takes. No matter the cost.



THE TRICKSTER

Days after the incident with the cursed spinning wheel, I still haven't recovered. But the pain is less.

I'm not sure how many days have passed, or how close I came to death during that time. When they tortured Juliette, they gave me something to keep me alert; but once that wore off, I spent most of my time deeply unconscious or drowning in the most horrific of nightmares. I remember Lady Kessalif coming in to check on me a few times, arguing with someone else about my condition, and confessing that she might have drained me too far, that I might be irreparable.

Which would make me useless to the King, and therefore dispensable.

But on this day, I feel a little stronger. I don't try to touch my magic—I'm not even sure it's there. But when Lady Kessalif pops in to check on me and sees me propped on my pillows, sipping water, she brightens. "Feeling better?"

"Fuck off."

"Ah, much better then. Good, good. And your magic?"

"It's there," I say, even though I'm not sure. "But barely."

“Well... we have time. The King has used the gold you spun for him to pay Qedron and Messava. He won't need more for a few weeks.”

I choke on the water I was swallowing. “He did what with the gold?”

“Paid a debt to our allies,” she says, frowning slightly.

“I thought he would put it in the vault.”

“Well, the conquest of Rimilon occupied more resources than he thought... you know, it really isn't any of your business.”

I start laughing. I can't hold it back—maybe it's the strain of the past several days. I laugh until I wheeze, and then I cough until my lungs ache.

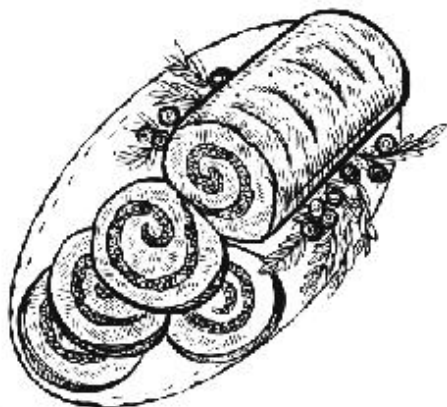
Lady Kessalif stares at me as if I've gone insane, then cautiously backs away and leaves the room, closing the door. I have better hearing than humans do, and I overhear her tell the servant outside to visit the palace physician and ask him to send a sleeping powder for me.

She thinks I've lost my mind. And maybe I have, because when the King finds out why I'm laughing, he won't think it's funny. If I'm lucky, he'll kill me on the spot. If I'm not, he'll torture me thoroughly before ending my life.

I thought I'd have more time, especially if he stored the bobbins of gold in the palace vaults until it could be melted down and stamped into coin or shaped into bars. But he gave it to his allies, to pay his debts.

Which is going to result in serious disappointment for all parties in just a few days—maybe a bit longer if I'm lucky. I've transformed wood into silver before, but not straw into gold, so I'm not certain of the time frame.

I imagine the look on the King's face when he finds out, and I burst into laughter again. I laugh until my weakened stomach revolts and I throw up in the basin beside my bed. And when the servant brings the sleeping powder, I'm still laughing.



JULIETTE

The journey to the Sanctuary takes longer than I anticipated. I teach Bede every Elvensign word and phrase I know, and then the Elvish women teach us both more signs. Then Bede and I play rhyming games with Lannau and Enthel, who teach us the meter and rhythm of Elven poetry forms, including the limericks they use for most common spells. Enthel brought along sheets of brown paper and a handful of pencils, so we play a game of intersecting words, and then a game where one of us draws and the others must guess the word or phrase associated with the drawing. When we tire of that, Enthel makes us all look out of the carriage windows and try to spot the items on a list she has made—things like grain silos, broken fences, wheelbarrows, white cows with brown spots, weathervanes, that sort of thing. Eventually I grow too bored to play, utterly sick of sitting in the carriage.

We spend the first night in a tiny roadside inn with no bathtubs and musty-smelling sheets. When we go downstairs for breakfast the next morning, there's a "Wanted" poster with a bountiful ransom promised for my capture. It appears the King is so eager to repay me for stealing his concubines that he's

willing to risk any loss of goodwill among the people just to get his hands on me again.

The sketch is a good one, recognizable as me, so Lannau and the carriage driver hustle me and Bede out the back door of the inn while Enthel purchases greasy breakfast bundles for us to take along.

“What if the carriage driver turns me in?” I whisper to Lannau, later that morning, once we’re well underway.

“He won’t,” she says casually. “He’s been spelled to ensure his loyalty. Can’t be too careful. Men are not to be trusted.”

We spend the second day huddled in the carriage, leaning against each other and trying to doze while it rattles over rutted lanes.

“The journey would be shorter if there weren’t so many patrols to avoid,” Lannau says once, pointedly, when I complain about the bumpy, circuitous route we’re taking.

Of course the patrols are my fault. They’re looking for me, or for other concubines who might be traveling away from Giltos. So I quit complaining.

After that, the hours melt together into an endless, amorphous stream. It seems as if I’ve been on the road forever, sealed into the grimy confines of my traveling clothes, condemned to the reek of my own sweaty feet and ripe armpits. What I wouldn’t give for a hot bath, a square meal, and a comfortable bed.

“We’d better risk another stop at an inn before we reach the Riddenwold,” I tell our guides. “We can’t meet the Elves looking like this—*smelling* like this.”

“It’s true, Enthel,” says Lannau, looking over at her partner. “Their human odor is overpowering. We need to preserve our magic for the journey into the forest, but we could spare a little. If we work together, we can veil the sight of an innkeeper and a few guests long enough to get these two upstairs to a room with a bathtub.”

Enthel sniffs delicately. “We’d better try. It’s a matter of survival, I’d say. And I could use a bath myself. I’m beginning

to smell, too.”

“Nonsense, love. All I smell is your usual fragrance.”
Lannau leans nearer and nips a kiss from her wife’s mouth.

That night, I’m finally able to wash multiple days’ worth of travel grime from my body. Bede bathes too, and then the wives share a bath. They take one bed, while Bede and I take the other.

I wake in the night to tiny, soft, wet sounds, and as my eyes adjust, I see Enthel on her back, knees arched and spread. Lannau’s face is buried between her wife’s thighs.

They’re clearly trying not to wake me and Bede, so I close my eyes and feign oblivion, even when Enthel emits a faint gasp as she comes.

I wonder how long they’ve been together. There’s an easy comfort between them, the proof of long acquaintance, and yet they obviously crave each other’s bodies as much as ever.

Will I ever have that with Rupert? What if the King rapes him, injures his mind and emotions beyond repair? What if Rupert can’t endure my touch after that? Or what if the King castrates him, cuts out his tongue, mutilates him in some other way? What if he decides to kill Rupert after all? What if... what if...

I lie frozen in the bed, prey to the circling panic. It holds me captive in my nightmares when I finally fall back asleep, and it haunts my mind the next day.

When we stop for a break to relieve ourselves, Bede and I are the first to return to the carriage.

Lannau and Enthel are probably fucking in the woods, signs Bede with a smirk.

I give her a faint half-smile.

Are you alright?

“I keep thinking... worrying about what’s happening to him.”

She nods sympathetically. *You are doing everything you can to help him.*

“Sacrificing too much, maybe.”

Maybe. She signs the word, then hesitates before moving her fingers quickly. *I have never loved anyone like you seem to love him. I think a love like this demands sacrifice.*

“But you think I was wrong,” I murmur. “About the firstborn. That part of the deal.”

She nods, winces. Her lips twitch, half-forming the shapes of words as she signs faster, with more intense energy. *But it is done now. Trust your choice, and trust in yourself. You will get back to him as quickly as possible. Whatever happens to him in the meantime is the King’s fault, not yours. Do not torment yourself. You must be at your best to survive this.*”

The carriage driver returns and hops up into his seat, so we let the conversation drop.

That afternoon, Lannau calls for a halt. “Here’s where we abandon the carriage,” she says. “Take your pack, and let’s go.”

Within minutes, we’re standing on a grassy lane that leads into the forest, watching our carriage and driver recede into the distance as they head back toward the main road.

“From here, we walk,” declares Lannau.

“For how long?” I ask.

“It depends on whether or not the barriers are still in the same place,” says Enthel cryptically.

“Thanks,” I mutter, hoisting my pack. “That’s a big fucking help.”

It’s uncharacteristically bitchy of me, and by the time we take our next bathroom break, I understand why. I’ve bled through my underwear, and there’s a tiny spot on the inside of my leggings. Any longer, and they’d have been saturated.

“Shit,” I hiss.

“Must you announce it, though?” calls Lannau from behind a nearby bush, with a chuckle.

“No, it’s—my monthly bleeding.”

“Oh.” A pause, then she says, “I haven’t had one in decades, and Enthel never did. You don’t have supplies, do you?”

“No.” I lean back against the trunk of a tree. It will be dark soon; the gloom of the forest is already thickening. Once the bleeding begins, the cramps are soon to follow, and for me, that means misery of horrific proportions. I’m in for a wretched night, trudging through this overgrown forest in the dark, with blood leaking out of me the whole time and my stomach muscles contorting themselves into knots.

“Shit,” I whisper again.

Someone taps my arm. It’s Bede, holding out a strip of cloth she has apparently ripped off the hem of her tunic.

I take it gratefully, folding it into a thick wad. “Thank you.”

She gives me a bright, satisfied smile. Like she owed me an enormous favor and she is pleased to have repaid a small part of it.

Already she’s such a different person than she was when I first met her. She was distant, wary, wounded—like an injured animal recoiling from a kind touch. And now she walks with a firm stride, holds her chin high, and radiates an eager confidence when she signs. I think I underestimated how much the ability to communicate affects one’s sense of worth. Being cut off from others, unable to express thoughts and feelings, can sap a person’s inner strength quickly, driving them into loneliness.

As we continue walking, I voice some of my thoughts to Bede. “I think the King took the tongues of the former concubines to isolate them from each other. To break apart bonds and ruin friendships, because he felt threatened by them.”

She starts signing immediately. *Yes. He said all the gossiping whores his father owned must be taught a lesson. He said the secrets we knew must stay locked away. We weren’t allowed writing material, either, and if one of us did obtain permission to write a note, a list, or a letter, it had to be checked personally by Lord Venedict or Lady Reese. The other servants were allowed to write and communicate—only the former concubines were subjected to this treatment.*

“The King is a piece of shit,” I say firmly. I’ve never expressed the sentiment out loud, and it feels good. Rebellious... and right.

Some of us in the House used to go down on each other, Bede confides. He despised us for that, too. He said our tongues were only supposed to please his father, and now that the old king was dead, we wouldn’t need them anymore.

I’m not sure how to ask the question that’s been niggling at my mind ever since I met her. “Did he... take anything else from you?” The moment I say it, I realize it’s too intimate, too invasive a question. “I’m sorry. You don’t have to answer that, and I shouldn’t have asked.”

But she’s already signing in response. *He removed the genitals of his father’s first tier of concubines. I was in the second tier, so I escaped that torture.*

“Small mercies,” I say quietly.

When the procession of women departed from the palace, I didn’t see everyone who joined. Perhaps some of those former concubines joined our exodus, exposing scars beyond what the rest of us carried. Guilt plucks at my heart, guilt that I didn’t stay in the city and see to it that everyone who left the palace with me found a more permanent haven after that first night. But I couldn’t waste any time. I had to leave.

I have to save Rupert. Whatever sympathy I may feel for others, he’s the person I care about most fervently, the one I can’t live without.

We trek onward through the darkening forest. Now that we’ve passed through the fringes of it, I realize it’s not a gentle sort of wood, with whispering foliage and leafy undergrowth and little animals squeaking and scurrying through the dry leaves. No, this is a thick, malevolent, mountainous forest of close-set, ponderous black trunks covered in scales of heavy bark. Sharp branches jut outward from each tree like broken teeth. Serrated vines twist through the bristling undergrowth, tearing at our clothes and hair. Beneath our feet, jagged stones and long, thorny stems poke through the crackling leaves.

“I thought the Elves were all about embracing nature, nourishing its beauty,” I mutter as we tramp onward, our path lit by a small lantern Enthel carries.

“They are,” she replies. “This belt of the forest is a deterrent, to keep humans out and convince them they must be going the wrong way.”

“I think they did the job a little too well, love,” says Lannau, drawing a knife from her belt and cutting away a cluster of thorns that has snagged her traveling cloak. “This is so much worse than the last time we visited.”

“How long ago did you visit?” I ask.

“A decade or so.”

My heart sinks a little. Ten years is a long time. Anything could have changed, and these two might not be entirely prepared for what we’ll encounter.

What if Rupert’s father is dead? How will I learn his name then?

If that happens, I’ll have to go back to Giltos, kidnap the King somehow, and torture him into telling me Rupert’s true name. Either that, or keep him as my prisoner for the rest of Rupert’s life, muzzled so he can’t give Rupert any commands.

No, that won’t work. Such a plan isn’t practical—too many holes, too many things that could go terribly wrong.

I *have* to find out Rupert’s true name.

A knot of pain twists through my lower belly, and I nearly whimper as I struggle forward through the darkness. Each time I shove aside a branch, I wish I had gloves—the sticks are abrasive, and some of the broken ones lacerate my palms.

Bede and I stay close behind the two Elven women, who are using little bursts of pale-green magic to untangle the forest in the direction we need to go. Vines uncoil and branches bend back temporarily, but they close behind us almost instantly with a whip-sharp snapping of vines and a groaning creak of wood.

“Pace yourself,” I hear Enthel murmur to her wife. “It seems we have a long way to go. As you said, the barriers are much thicker than they used to be.”

Another stab of pain wrenches through my body.

Usually, my cramps are manageable with the help of certain herbs and tonics that I keep around the house. But I have no such medicine now. My womb feels as if a giant hand is squeezing it, over and over. Or maybe it feels as though every muscle inside me has gone rigid as the trees, and those stiff muscles are all quaking and creaking stiffly, agonizingly. Nausea shoots into my belly, tightening my throat.

I inhale through my nose, blow out through my mouth, and keep walking. One foot after the other, again and again, when all I want to do is lie down on a soft bed, pin a hot-water bottle to my abdomen, and curl up into a ball of misery.

Perhaps I should ask the Elves for help with the pain. Maybe they could do something. But they need their magic to fight the forest, which is growing denser and thornier by the second.

And so continues the worst night of my entire life. My mind sinks into a dogged, determined blur, with the only focused thought being *one more step*. The night is a sodden weight on my shoulders, and the forest rips at me with its claws, and the strained muscles in my belly creak and convulse, while I fight the urge to vomit and force myself to inhale and expel air.

Step. By. Step.

Another wave of agony, so hideous I have to stop for a second and bend over just to make it through—but I can't stop, because the thorns are closing in around me, and I must hurry ahead to stay in the little pocket of light and safety with the others.

Part of me wants to ask why we're doing this at night, but I already know the answer. The Elves thought we could make it through this area within a few hours, but their memory of the place was flawed, or it has changed. And now that we've begun, we can't stop. There's nowhere to camp—nowhere to stand or sit. If we stop moving, the forest will eat us. It will run needle-thin thorns into our eyes, plug our ears with moss, fill our mouths with brambles. We'll become part of the Riddenwold, trapped forever.

I keep stumbling forward, holding my stomach, silently begging the goddess for relief. Of all the nights for this to happen—of course it had to be this one.

“Let’s keep up the pace,” says Lannau.

Bede glances back, but the lamplight is behind her, and I can’t make out her expression. All I know is pain—wrenching, grasping, twisting pain, the agony of my body’s betrayal. I hiss another breath and struggle forward again, while vines snap back into place behind me with a menacing rustle.

The four of us are a drop of light in a vast tangle of dark forest, a blob of glowing hope in an endless bristling sea of black trees and writhing vines.

I am Rupert’s only hope.

I will save him. I will save myself. I will save the kingdom.

The kingdom, sure. But mostly me and him.

I choke back the bile surging in my throat, and I focus on the two of us, Rupert and me. How strange it is that I’ve lived all my life up to this point *without* him, and yet I can’t seem to bear the thought of spending the rest of my existence apart from him?

How do two people become linked so swiftly, so surely? How does the knot form and tighten, how do the cords thicken between two hearts until they are inextricably bound? How does such a bond feel like the truest freedom?

Goddess, I’m going to fall over. I’m going to fall right over into these spiky bushes, into the pain-sharp darkness, and I’m going to lie there and die, because dying in this forest feels more endurable than taking another step with this fucking monster in my lower belly.

I’ve probably bled through the cloth Bede gave me. When the cramps are this bad, the bleeding is usually worse too, flowing out of me like water.

I turn the pain and the purpose into a rhyme of my own, a spell against my own weakness.

I can’t do this, but I will do it.

I can't bear this, yet I will bear it.

It's too much, and yet I will carry it.

I will endure.

One more step.

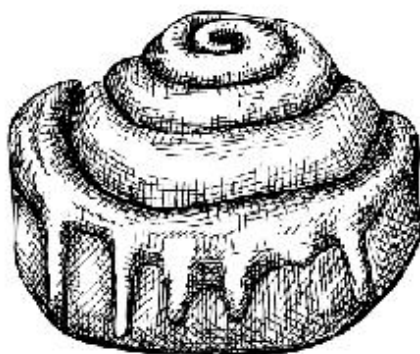
One more step.

Blackness all around me, except for the silhouettes of the women and the drop of gold that is the lamp.

Thorns in my hands and thorns in my belly.

Acid in my throat, on my tongue.

Black and gold and pain, pain, pain.



THE TRICKSTER

I'm nearly well again. Today Lady Kessalif asked me to perform a small spell for her, and I was able to do it without collapsing.

"Very good," she said, in a tone thick with condescension. "Your eminent master is becoming impatient. He desires you to perform some spells for him as soon as you're able."

"Why can't you do it?" I retort.

Her lips tighten, and she pauses before answering. "As you know, the women in this kingdom are occasionally gifted with magic, but only in trace amounts. I possess more than most, and with training and supplemental artifacts, I've been able to elevate my craft. But the King is always looking for more power. And since the march of the concubines—"

"Wait... the *what?*" I exclaim.

She shifts her weight from one foot to the other and smooths both hands over her silken robes. "Well... it seems that the King worded his agreement with you rather injudiciously, and the woman—your accomplice—instead of taking one or

two ‘friends’ out of the House of Bounty with her, she took them all.”

I break into a grin so wide my cheeks ache. *That’s my girl.*

“The King wanted to stop them,” continues Lady Kessalif. “But I advised against it. It’s been a long time since anyone in this kingdom bargained with an Elf, full-blooded or not... but when I was a child I saw the direct result of a broken bargain. Not a pretty end for the one who disobeyed the terms of the deal, and I told the King as much.”

“Not a pretty end at all,” I agree, and my smile fades... because I, too, have seen the dreadful end of a broken deal. I had to watch it unfold right in front of my eyes, had to hear her screams... goddess, it’s the worst memory of my life, and I’m instantly furious at Lady Kessalif for evoking it.

After a quick glance at the half-open door of my chamber, she reaches toward my forehead again, even though she already placed her inner wrist there to check for a fever. She’s not a physician, but she knows the signs of sickness caused by magic overuse.

But this time the gesture is different. It’s her palm, not her wrist, that lands on my forehead, and after a second she drags the backs of her fingers down my cheek. “As I said, the King grows impatient. But I could be persuaded to hold him off for another day or two, perhaps. If you do something for me in return.”

A dry laugh bursts from my lips. “You want to fuck me?”

The sting of rejection flickers in her eyes. “It’ll hurt less than when he does it. I’ve seen how he treats the boys.”

“Can’t be much worse than the way he treats women.”

“Oh, my lamb.” She shakes her head and pats my cheek. “You have so much to learn about life here in the palace. You think you’ve been poorly treated, that you’ve had a hard life? Darling, this place is so much worse. It takes your innocence, your independence, your freedom, your morals, your soul—” She sucks in a quick breath, like a sob cut off before it can escape. “They take everything you once admired about yourself and make it theirs.”

“Why stay, then?”

She smiles faintly, touches the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, the creases around her mouth. “Once you’ve been here long enough, you discover you have roots so deep that if you tried to break away, some vital vessel deep within your psyche would burst and bleed. For someone like me, there’s no way back. Not from the things I’ve done.”

Maybe Juliette would know what to say to her. I’m no philosopher—I’m a renegade, a trickster.

“I could try to cobble together some palliative wisdom,” I tell her bluntly. “But I’m a simple man... simpler when I’m tired or angry. You want me to make you feel better? I can’t. My fingers, my tongue, and my cock belong to someone else. What the King takes from me, I will endure, but I won’t give myself to anyone except my beloved, not even for a few extra days of rest. You’re a powerful, attractive woman, and you can find lovers aplenty, I’ve no doubt. You don’t need me.”

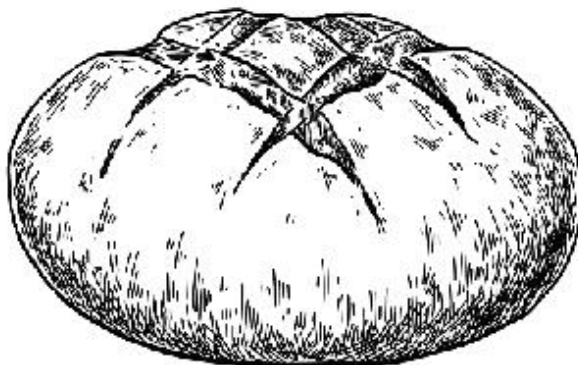
Lady Kessalif’s mouth bends in a sad smile, and she brushes her fingers through my hair. “Who would have thought you possessed such honor and loyalty? I thought all men were devoid of such traits nowadays. Very well, lamb. I will plead with the King on your behalf anyway. As for the lovers you mentioned—they are more difficult to find than one might think, and not as attentive as I suspect you would have been.”

She turns and glides toward the door, her robes whispering across the polished floor. With her hand on the door’s edge, she turns back to say, “I am sorry for what I did, draining you so low. Stealing your power and rendering you helpless. I know how it feels, and... I would ask your forgiveness.”

I don’t forgive. I hold grudges until I’ve played my fill of tricks on whoever wronged me. But the haunted wistfulness in her tone affects me more deeply than it should.

“You have my forgiveness,” I tell her.

The sorceress bows her head in grateful acceptance and leaves my room, closing the door gently behind her.



JULIETTE

The pain is gone, and its absence is the most beautiful thing I've ever felt. I'm lying on something soft, and I feel clean. Dry. I still feel a trickle of blood between my legs when I sit up, but I'm wearing a thick, warm cloth pad inside clean underwear, and I'm dressed in a loose, cream-colored nightgown.

The room I'm in has gently curved walls of white plaster. Bluish vines fork across the pale walls, bearing blossoms like plum-sized lamps—blossoms that glow peach and ivory and yellow. Through three tall, pointed windows, a light breeze dances, feathering my hair against my cheek.

Slowly I leave the bed—a delicately crafted four-poster with shimmering curtains of gauzy green. When I stand upright, the cramps don't return, and I breathe a sigh of relief, followed instantly by a wave of shame.

I must have passed out in the forest. I remember keeping up the pace for a long time, and then... nothing. My companions must have had to carry me to safety.

My travel clothes have been laid over a chair. Quickly I plunge my hand into the pocket of the leggings and find my

notebook there, with the gold pin still threaded into the spine. Thank the goddess—my bargaining chip is intact.

We must be in the Sanctuary. There's no other explanation for this beauty, this haven. Somehow Lannau and Enthel arranged for this luxurious treatment. How much have they told the other Elves about why we're here?

First things first, though... I want a look at this place. Cautiously I approach the windows.

Beneath the warm blue of the sky, the earth has been cleft into a gigantic V. A pair of brown cliffs slash downward, angled to meet at the bottom of the ravine, where a river of mirrored blue sparkles in the morning sunshine. At the top of each cliff swells the forest—a healthier, fuller, and more abundant-looking than the cursed black tangle we struggled through last night.

Here and there along the steep slopes of the cliffs are broad ledges lined with quaint cottages—sturdy beams, brown stone, and shingled roofs. Vines and bushes cluster at the brink of each ledge, dripping down the cliffside in curtains or tendrils of shining green. There are little waterfalls, too, threads of glistening white water trailing from the rocks and emptying into the blue river below.

Long ropes drop from the clifftops down to the shining water at the bottom of the gorge, black cords against the brown rock. They're cables with pods attached to them, linked to pulley systems. If I squint, I can see two people sitting in one of the pods as it slowly ascends the face of the cliff.

The Elves are not entirely averse to mechanics and technology, it would seem. But they prefer to keep their machines simple and clean—probably aided with magic as well as science. What little smoke there is carries the fragrance of charred wood, not coal.

The sound of rushing water attracts my attention. There's an enormous waterfall on the opposite side of the gorge, off to the right of my window. It falls in a shining, thundering mass of white foam, all the way down to the river. I've never seen a waterfall so immense. Some of the smaller waterfalls in the ravine have water-wheels at their base, carefully placed to harness the power of the river—but the largest waterfall has no

such installation. It is untamable, ancient, brimming with not only physical force, but magical energy as well. Even I, a mere human, can feel the humming power of that marvelous cascade.

Boats dot the surface of the river below, though they keep well away from the thundering foot of the falls.

Something creaks behind me, and I spin around to see Bede entering the room, carrying a tray with a steaming bowl and a mug.

She sets the tray on a dresser and signs to me. *You're awake, thank goddess!*

"It's just my monthly bleeding." I grimace, embarrassed. "It gets bad sometimes."

It's not only that. You're exhausted from everything you've been through. She points to the mug on the tray. *This tea will help with the cramps. They gave you one dose when we arrived, and then I got you to bed.*

So she cleaned me up, dressed me, and took care of me. Gratitude expands in my heart, fierce and warm.

"Thank you," I tell her. "I appreciate what you did, more than you'll ever know."

She gives me another of her rare smiles. *Eat your soup quickly. We must meet with the Elders.*

I've barely finished the last of the tea when Lannau and Enthel breeze into the room without knocking.

"The Elders are growing impatient," says Enthel quietly. "They gave us a little time to rest, for your sake, but now they require an explanation for our presence, or they will banish us from the Sanctuary."

"Get dressed, get dressed," urges Lannau. "A few bites of food, a few swallows of tea, and we must go! Quickly now!"



We hurry through the halls of the building so fast I barely have time to register anything. I catch the atmosphere of the place in glimpses: carved archways framing bits of a lush garden, shelves of ancient books crammed into an alcove, statuary framing the doors of a long gallery lined with portrait medallions in gilt frames.

There's a sense of solemnity, of wealth, yet the place doesn't have the stuffy elegance of the King's palace, so repressed and restrictive. There's a breezy quality to this house—open doors and windows, and the pleasant voices of people moving quickly through the halls, busy about some task or other. Through one archway, I catch the lilt of distant music. We pass a room where several small figures are seated before a taller one, reciting a rhyme in soft, uncertain voices.

“Mind your emotions,” says Enthel, low, as we climb a short stairway. “The Elves respect emotional control, and they do not take kindly to human extremes of emotion, especially in public. That's one reason Lannau and I left. You'll be tempted to let all your emotions flood out, to let them know how sincere you are and how much you want to save Rupert. But among the Elves, the more you care, the more control you exert over yourself. Too much reckless emotion is the sign of a shallow soul. The more stoic the visage, the deeper the feeling goes.”

That's unfortunate for me, the girl who loves to talk loudly about my ideas, the girl who tends to have episodes of panic at pivotal moments. Somehow I'm going to have to fight against every instinct and keep myself perfectly calm during this, the most important encounter of my life.

My stomach flutters with dreadful anticipation, because I'm about to meet the *Elves*. The Withdrawn, the King, the Goddess's Favored. I'm meeting them in real life, and Rupert's fate rests with them.

At the top of the steps, we enter a domed room with windows all around—windows whose glass is tinted amber, gold, and cherry-red. It's the loveliest room I've ever seen, and judging by the glorious sunburst design overhead, it seems to be designed to celebrate the light of the sun.

I try to restrain my delight at the way the stained glass casts pretty colors over the pale tiles of the floor. Instead I concentrate on breathing slowly and deeply, willing my heart to pace itself slower, slower.

Settle down, Juliette. Be calm. Be gracious. The deeper your emotion, the more peaceful you will appear.

I hope it's working. I think my heart rate is slowing. The cramps in my abdomen are twinging again, but it's a slight pain, one I can easily handle, thanks to the herbal tea I was given.

The Elders are not standing throughout the room, or sitting in chairs around some central space. There are eight of them, and they are kneeling or reclining on cushions around a low, circular table. Each is occupied with a different task.

One auburn-haired woman with pale skin is grinding some dry leaves with a mortar and pestle; another is crocheting some elaborate garment from silver thread. A man with long white hair is sketching the portrait of another Elf, a handsome dark-haired man with tanned skin and brilliant blue eyes—eyes exactly the same hue as Rupert's. He glances up, then returns his attention to a ledger of some kind—I can see lists of numbers with notations beside them.

As we move farther into the room, one of the Elders rises, fetches four pillows from a basket in the corner, and lays them out in a row on the floor. There are no servants that I can see. Unlike the courtiers and nobles in the palace of Giltos, these leaders seem to serve themselves and occupy their time with useful work.

I follow Enthel's and Lannau's example and kneel on one of the pillows, stealing another glance at the blue-eyed Elven male. His resemblance to Rupert is uncanny, except his face is narrower, sleeker, more refined, and his skin is perfectly smooth.

“I trust you’ve had sufficient rest,” says the woman with the auburn hair. She never takes her eyes from the mortar and pestle, and the word “welcome” is noticeably absent from her speech.

“Yes, thank you,” I respond without thinking. Perhaps I should have let Enthel and Lannau take the lead, but when I glance at Lannau, she gives me a slight nod, so I press forward. “My name is Juliette Wetheris. I bring a gift to the Elders—a precious heirloom, long-lost to your culture, and recently rediscovered by a Half-Elf who used to reside here—the son of the Prime Elder, Lord Argelos. I do not know what name he used among you, but he was sometimes called Rahndek during his wanderings in my part of the world.” I want to call him Rupert, but that name would mean nothing to them.

The blue-eyed Elder looks up from his ledger. His eyes appear emotionless at first, but as I hold his gaze, I realize that they burn with a cold fire from deep, deep within.

“We know the one who called himself Rahndek,” says the pale woman with the auburn hair. “We called him Akos.”

Goddess help me, I will never remember all the names that man has used.

“The Half-Elf I speak of is so much more than his names,” I continue, “and that’s why I’ve come. The King of Darthage forced him to reveal his true name, and now holds him in sway. The King will force this Half-Elf, your kinsman, to do terrible magic for the Crown, and he will do cruel things to his body and soul, as well.”

My voice quivers, so I pause, letting silence settle in my heart. I focus on relaxing the parts of my body that are tensing up. Once I have taken five good, slow breaths, I say, “To free your kinsman, I need his true name. As I understand it, he can’t repeat his own name again until he is freed, so he can’t reveal it to me himself. And even if he could, I can’t get to him—not without a disguise. So I had no choice but to come here and ask for this secret... to ask for your mercy.”

“What of this heirloom?” says another Elder, a male with ebony skin and hair green as grass. “What is the cultural treasure you claim to be returning to us?”

“Akos discovered it recently. I’m not sure where he obtained it, but he would have wanted it returned to his people.” I reach into my pocket, draw out the notebook, and extract the gold pin from its spine.

“You’re so sure he would have brought it back?” The blue-eyed Elder’s lip curls slightly, the faintest hint of a sneer. “He would more likely have kept it or bartered it.”

“Perhaps you don’t know him as well as you think,” I say smoothly.

Enthel shifts on her pillow, probably a hint for me to control my temper.

I hold up the golden pin, then twist its head to summon Axidor.

The moment the blade shoots out, five of the Elders rise from their seats. They move swiftly, and their faces don’t alter much, but they’re clearly startled.

The man with green hair strides forward, holding out his hands. “May I?”

“Of course.” I lay the sword across his palms.

He tests it, much like Lannau did, and pronounces, with a tone of stony calm, that it is indeed Axidor, blade of Liacan.

It’s so strange to me to see each member of the Elders go from relaxed, casual expressions to masks of utter stoicism.

The more stoic the visage, the deeper the feeling goes.

Which means everyone in this room is deeply affected by the return of the sword.

“In gratitude for the return of this, one of our most fabled historic items, we will grant you any boon within our power,” says the auburn-haired woman.

“I require nothing except to leave her with my friend, with our memories intact, carrying the knowledge of Akos’s true name—and a disguise that can get me into the court,” I add. “Since Akos assumed someone else’s identity when he infiltrated the palace, they’re sure to create safeguards to

prevent that from happening again. My disguise would need to be a powerful one.”

“The gift of the name is beyond our power,” says the auburn-haired Elder. “That decision rests with his father alone, and his father has sworn by the goddess never to—”

“To speak the name aloud, I know.” I regret the interruption a second later, but I’ve already done it, so I may as well forge ahead. “I thought perhaps you could write it down.” I’m talking directly to Lord Argelos now. I’m absolutely certain he’s Rupert’s father, not only because of the resemblance, but because everyone else in the room seems to be carefully avoiding eye contact with him.

The blue-eyed Elder shakes his head. “Did the boy tell you that? He got it wrong, as usual. When I named him, I vowed to the goddess that I would neither speak it aloud nor write it down. I know the dangers of a true name to a Half-Elf. Do you think I’m a fool, that I would leave such a loophole?” He speaks with perfect evenness of tone, not a trace of anger. Which means he must be very, very angry with me. “I warned my son about the risks, over and over. How did the King convince him to give up his name?”

“He tortured me,” I reply.

“You?” The Elder’s eyes narrow slightly. “And what are you to my son?”

I take a deep breath, and erase every hint of emotion from my face, my tone. “I love him, and he loves me in return.”

For a long moment I fear I’ve done wrong in suppressing what I feel. It seems so counterintuitive, so wrong to conceal it.

But the woman crocheting with silver thread scrutinizes my face for a moment, then nods and says, “You do us honor by sublimating your emotions. It’s a difficult task for humans, and yet you care so deeply for this Half-Elf that you are willing to reverse everything that feels natural to you, as a human. You want very badly to convince us of your love for him.”

“Yes.” I keep my tone flat, my face impassive, except for a tiny tremor of my lower lip. I can’t control that bit, no matter how hard I try.

“Be at ease, Juliette,” says the Elder, continuing to crochet even as she watches me. “We believe that you care for this man. Why else would you travel so far, through the Riddenwold, risking the loss of your life and memories? Why else would you yield this treasure into our hands?” She gestures to the sword.

Rupert’s father speaks again, his voice as cold as stone. “He loved you enough to give up his name to a human ruler?”

“He did,” I say. “He *does*. And I know you swore never to speak or write his name, and that revealing it might cause your death, but... I’m asking you to do this. I’ll beg on my knees if it will make a difference—threaten you if I must. I’ll do anything. He thinks you hate him, but you don’t, do you? You made that vow, not because you were ashamed of a bastard half-Elven son, but because you wanted to protect him.”

My emotions are leaking through my tone now, but I don’t care... I’ve proved I can restrain them, and that will have to be enough.

Fingers grip my arm, and at first I think it’s a warning, but when I glance over, Bede is looking at me with a wild light in her eyes. Her fingers are moving. *Sign it. He can sign the name to you.*

“Fuck, yes,” I breathe. My gaze snaps up to Rupert’s father. His eyes are glowing with suppressed emotion, and he rises from his pillow, nodding.

“I can sign it,” he says tersely. “If you know Elvensign.”

“I do,” I reply, nodding at Bede. “I taught it to her.”

“And you’ll free my son. You swear it? You will let nothing stop you until he is free?”

“I swear before the goddess, either he will be free, or I will die in the attempt,” I say.

“You will need a disguise, as you said.” The auburn-haired woman with the mortar and pestle rises from her spot. “It will need to be a powerful one, deeply layered to avoid any enhanced forms of detection the King’s sorceress may have put in place. We can prepare the charm tonight, and it will be

ripened by tomorrow. We'll need a feast afterward, to replenish the energy we spend."

"I'll see to that," says the Elder with the green hair. "Chalcis, will you take Axidor to the vault? It can rest there until we arrange for it to be properly displayed for our people's enjoyment."

"Of course, Oleth." Chalcis accepts the sword and hurries away, holding it reverently.

"May I help you?" I say impulsively. "With the feast? I'm rather a good cook. After I have Akos's true name, I would be honored to help prepare food for all of you, as a way of showing my gratitude."

Oleth looks surprised, but he nods. "Very well. Argelos can show you to the kitchens when you're done."

"Lord Argelos?" I glance at Rupert's father for confirmation.

He nods. His face is a bit more relaxed now.

"Ah, the business of true names." Lannau hops up, off her cushion. "It's much less dramatic for a full-blooded Elf. Using our true name allows someone to command us for one request only, after which they may never speak the name again. Most Elves employ that power by mutual agreement, on their wedding night." She winks at Enthel.

"Off with you," says Oleth, with a faint smile. "You two have become far too human during your sojourn outside this haven. And you're weary—I can see it. You'll bathe in the waters of the Alsynrush and renew your spirits. These two must be alone for the revelation of the name."

The Elders and our guides leave the room. I squeeze Bede's hand briefly in thanks before letting her go as well.

We stand awkwardly in the amber and golden glow of the room, Lord Argelos and I, until he seats himself on a pillow again and gestures for me to sit across from him.

"Where did you learn Elvensign?" he asks.

"From some neighbors of ours. Their daughter could not hear, and the family used it to communicate. I'm not sure where

they learned it, but I picked it up from them because I wanted to be able to talk to their little girl. I suppose the goddess knew I would need the knowledge someday.”

“Indeed. But not every human would have taken the time to learn the language, even if the opportunity was presented to them.”

I think that’s a compliment, but I can’t read his expression. “I had a question about the use of true names—how it works after I free your son.”

“For a Half-Elf, once the bond is broken, the name may not be used again by the former master. But anyone else who knows the name may create a new bond.”

“So when I free Rup—I mean Akos, he becomes bound to me?”

“He does. But you may nullify the bond by giving him one primary command—telling him to be his own master in everything, and to obey no future orders from you.”

“But if someone else learns his name, they could bind him again.”

“They could. But I won’t be giving them the name, nor, I trust, will you. And I also trust that you will keep yourself out of situations where you could be tortured, thus forcing him to reveal it again.”

“Wait, now I have to stay out of dangerous situations *and* potential torture scenarios?” I say dryly. “That’s asking too much. I’m not sure I can agree to those terms—I’m such a fan of being tortured, you know.”

The corner of Argelos’s mouth twitches. Barely. “We all have our burdens to bear.”

“So we do.”

“If you’re ready, then.”

“I am.”

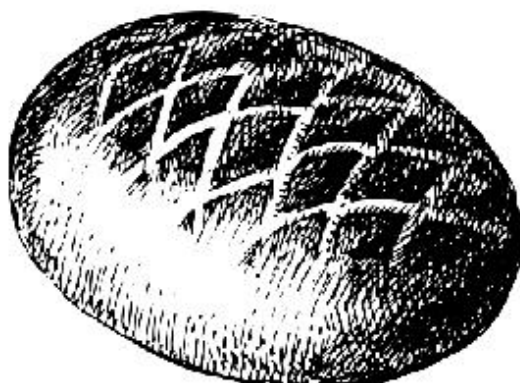
It feels strange to be sitting in this distant haven, under the stained-glass ceiling, while a stoic Elven leader lifts elegant, ring-laden fingers and begins to sign his son’s name to me.

I collect each letter in my mind and assemble them all into a long string, until he places both hands in his lap.

“Can I say it aloud, just once, to be sure I have the pronunciation right?” I ask.

He nods.

After drawing a deep breath, I speak my lover’s true name for the first time.



THE TRICKSTER

I lived with my mother until I was twelve years old. By then, the human ways of expressing emotion were thoroughly ingrained in me. I could pass as human easily, providing I wore a cap or a hood to hide my pointed ears. My mother and I lived an isolated life in a tiny village where she worked as a seamstress—and sometimes as bedmate to a few men who paid for her company. I didn't realize why those men came to visit until a few boys at the local school teased me about having a whore for a mother.

I couldn't risk fighting them outright over it—my cap might be knocked off, and my ears would give me away. But I learned to play tricks on those boys, using the bit of my magic that I could control, plus some human ingenuity.

As I matured, my magic began to ripen as well, and despite the few books my mother had managed to find on the subject, she could not serve as my teacher.

“Why can't we go to my father?” I would ask her. “He could teach me.”

I longed to meet him, to know him, but she refused to tell me where he lived, how she had met him, or anything else... until she became ill. It was a wasting disease; one of the men she'd bedded had given it to her. She spent every coin she had saved trying to find a cure, and I searched the books desperately for information on healing, but in the end, both of us failed.

One morning, I woke to find that she'd packed us each a bag. From a hollow beneath the hearth, she took an amethyst threaded with gold veins, a relic she had bargained for years ago, she said. The peddler who sold it to her claimed it could lead us to the Sanctuary.

She and I followed the lines of light cast by the charmed gemstone. It did indeed open the barriers of the Riddenwold and guide us to the Sanctuary. But the journey took my mother's last bit of strength, and she was fading as we approached the edge of the cliffs and looked down upon the houses below.

I thought we had made it just in time. I thought we'd journeyed there so she could get help from the Elves.

I thought they would heal her.

But my mother had made a bargain with my father, years before. She had vowed on her life never to trouble him again.

As we stood atop the cliffs, taking in the sight of the ravine, Elves approached us, and she them to send for Lord Argelos.

When he arrived—the moment he came within sight—the goddess struck my mother down for breaking her vow.

She knew it would happen. She was dying anyway, and her last act was to bring me to my father so he could care for me and train me.

I watched her shriek and thrash in spasms of pain. Watched the light drain from her eyes. My father stood over us both, stone-faced and emotionless, while I clawed at her body and begged her to come back. At last he picked me up, carried me away from her, and sat me down for my first lesson in the control of the spirit.

Later I understood why he did it, why he repressed my emotions so ruthlessly during those early days. He was trying to help me the only way he knew how. But I was too young to view it as anything but cruelty and callousness, and those memories of him soured our connection permanently. He did not love me the way she had loved me, so I could see nothing in him but smooth, impenetrable marble, remote as the moon and cold as ice.

I learned magic from my father. Learned many things from him, in fact, but I struggled to relate to him, and I never quite fit into his world. But by the time I gathered the courage to leave the Sanctuary for good, I didn't fit into the human world, either.

Doomed to drift forever between the two, I wandered anchorless, purposeless, until *her*. Until Juliette.

I picture her rich curves, the kissable dents and divots of her flesh, her lovely skin, and her beautiful eyes. I imagine running my hands through the glossy acorn-brown waves of her hair.

She fills my thoughts while I languish in my room and wait to be summoned by the King.



JULIETTE

I try not to think about him. Which is difficult when he is laced through the cords of my heart, tied there in intricate knots that it would take years to pick apart.

I try not to imagine what the King might be making him do.

I have his name, but I can't leave yet. I need the spell they're crafting, the disguise to hide me so I can get back into the Royal City, into the palace.

So while I wait, I must keep busy, or I will shatter into a thousand shards, and I very much doubt I'd be able to put myself back together.

The house I woke up in is apparently one of the primary gathering places of the settlement. It's a long, narrow building built on a ledge the Elves chiseled out of the cliff. I'm told that when the water in the Gorge is highest, it comes right up to the windows of the lowest level.

I'm enraptured with the building's kitchens—bustling spaces whose baskets and bins overflow with the freshest produce, while the cabinets are stocked with a broad variety of

spices, including many I've never seen. Rupert's father brought me down here after we'd waited for several minutes to be sure he wasn't going to die. Apparently the goddess conceded the loophole and didn't consider signing the name to be a breach of his vow—for which I thanked her in a silent prayer as he led me to the kitchens and left me with a solemn admonishment to enjoy myself.

The Elves' kitchen is far more peaceful than a human kitchen with the same number of workers could ever be. The Elves are so even-tempered, so considerate, and they move smoothly between and around each other, exchanging pleasant words, concise requests, or compliments on the progress of the meal.

Several of the Elves working around me are using magic alongside their culinary skills. I'm surrounded by self-stirring batter, vegetables that chop or dice themselves, and ovens that reach the proper temperature with the quick recitation of an Elvish rhyming couplet.

I'm limited to my own expertise, but I don't mind. I'm just glad to be doing what I love. When I'm thinking of ingredients, quantities, and embellishments, I can't be torturing myself with anxiety about Rupert.

Whatever happens to him, we will deal with it somehow. He can heal from anything—I can help him heal. But he can't die. He can't. He must stay alive and wait for me—*hold on, darling, hold on*—

Gritting my teeth, I seize the bowl of ground cinnamon and sprinkle a generous amount into the batter, along with orange zest, a bit of orange juice, and some mashed banana. I'm making a big batch of hearty, flavorful breads—perhaps more like cakes, because I plan to add a sugary glaze. They're going to be fucking delicious.

I work for hours, only pausing to visit the bathroom. I have no idea what the fertility cycles of Elvish women are like, but I'm pleased to find high-quality period supplies tucked into a basket near the sink, so I help myself before washing my hands with a sweetly-scented bar of soap and returning to the kitchen.

As I'm glazing the last loaf, more Elves enter the kitchen to carry all the food out to the tables in the dining hall. A few of them take the platters holding my cakes, and I hurry to put the last one on a plate and add a sprinkle of cinnamon sugar and a sprig of orange peel for garnish before trooping out of the kitchen along with them.

Like all the rooms in this place, the dining hall is long and narrow by necessity, following the shape of the ledge on which it is built. The windows on one side face the cliff and a strip of garden, while the windows on the opposite side overlook the river, now swathed in the glimmering purple shadows of evening. Vines twine along the inner walls of the dining room and drip from the ceiling, blooming with plump spheres of golden light.

The Elves settle into place along the tables. I've never seen so many hues of skin and hair, so many colorful glowing eyes, like living gemstones. They laugh, smile, and jest like humans would, because these are shallow emotions, befitting a merry feast. But some of the older Elves are quiet, deeply moved by the return of Axidor, celebrating their joy deep inside. Their silence is a testament to the intensity of their feelings.

After asking around, I'm able to locate Bede, Lannau, and Enthel. I slide into a spot next to Bede and say, without preamble, "Isn't it strange to think that in the human world, a gathering like this would get louder as people became merrier? But here, by the end of the night, it might become completely silent."

It all depends on how the Elves react to wine, she signs, with a smirk. Do their emotions remain shallow, or do they deepen?

"I suppose we'll find out," I whisper, then fall silent as three of the Elders rise. Each recites a short poem of welcome and thanks, enunciated in pleasant tones, with a delicate hint of emotion. The Elves recognize the end of each composition by pressing their pointer fingers together and touching the center of their foreheads with the tips of those steeped fingers.

Then everyone begins to feast.

Throughout the evening more Elves recite poetry—some with magical results, others merely for the joy of rhythm. Some of it is in Elventongue, but others perform in Arcspeech as well. I'm not sure what differentiates the standard poems from actual spells—perhaps the intent of the speaker, whether or not they are purposefully tapping into their magical energy to make something happen—or perhaps there's a different cadence used for magic.

I could learn so much here. But the culture would be a difficult adjustment, and I doubt Rupert would ever want to return—perhaps for a visit, but not for good.

I can't help thinking of the dream I shared with him, the vision of a possible future for the two of us. I laid my heart bare to him then, with all the foolishness of a love that began too quickly, and might end far too soon.

No... no, I can't think about this now—I need to repress these thoughts, these emotions. I need to pretend I'm alright, and eat cake.

Determinedly I fill my plate, taking a slice of my own loaf cake as well. It turned out perfectly—just the right amount of spice versus fruity richness. But although I can tell it's delicious, I can't manage more than a couple bites of that or any other dish. So eventually I stop trying, and I sit stiffly with my hands in my lap. Bede has been struggling with her food, and she eventually gives up as well.

To her credit, the auburn-haired Elder notices and comes to us quietly, leading us from the feast chamber back to the room where I recovered earlier today.

"I'm sorry we weren't better company," I tell her.

"No apologies needed," she says soothingly. "Your guides are in their element. They will entertain us on your behalf. I've never seen two Elves behave more like humans. Rest well." With a slight smile, she gives us a half-bow and glides from the room, closing the door.

The world beyond the windows is the frosty white of waterfalls, the silvered ebony of rocky cliffs, the shimmer of moonlit leaves and the black glimmer of the river. I stand there,

drinking in the monochromatic beauty of the Sanctuary, long after Bede has gone to sleep.

Tomorrow they will have my disguise ready for me—a spell, a relic, a tonic—I have no idea what it will be, but hopefully it will be my shield as I return to the palace, deliver the King’s doom, and free Rupert. I’m dreading the journey back through the Riddenwold, back across the countryside, through the outskirts of Giltos and into its maze of streets. I dread passing through the palace gates again, standing in the King’s presence again, risking everything again. But it never crosses my mind to leave Rupert to his fate. That was never an option.

Real love doesn’t abandon. It rescues, heals, and cherishes.

And it waits.



THE TRICKSTER

The King explodes into my bedroom with a roar of fury. He's at my bedside in three strides, collaring me, dragging me out from beneath the sheets. I'm a tall man, broad-shouldered, but he's a solidly-built warrior fueled by rage. When he slams me against the wall, my first instinct is to fight back—but my limbs don't respond to the urge.

It's the first time in days that I've felt the power of the bond between us—the King's will dominating mine. No matter how much I want to, I cannot harm him.

“What have you done?” His spit flecks my lips. I reach up and wipe it off with the back of my hand. At least I can do that much.

“I'm not sure what you're talking about,” I reply.

With an angry growl he rams me harder against the wall. I'm wearing nothing but a pair of undershorts, since I've been given no other clothes, and I'm keenly uncomfortable with how closely his massive body is pressing against mine. His hot breath is tinged with a foul odor. “You know exactly what I

mean. The gold. I paid debts to two allies with that gold, only for it to revert back into straw in their treasuries.”

“The transmutation doesn’t last forever,” I say.

“You didn’t warn me.”

I look him in the eyes. “You didn’t command it.”

“Do you realize how this makes me look?” His face is nearly purple with fury, a thick vein standing out along his temple. “It looks as if I willfully deceived them—or worse, made a mockery of our alliance. I have to come up with the actual gold within a month, or we’ll lose our allies, at best... and at worst, it will be war. Do you understand, you son of a bitch?”

“I understand.”

His body grinds harder against mine. “Do you know what I like to do when I’m angry? I like to cut people up. And I like to fuck. Torture, and fucking. Those things make me feel better.”

“You should try a nice glass of wine and a bath,” I reply, attempting a smirk.

His mouth crushes abruptly against mine, bristly mustache and sour breath and punishing force. His slimy tongue worms its way into my mouth, and I can’t bite him, or protest, or resist. So I endure, until he’s done swiping his tongue along the insides of my cheeks.

At last he shoves himself back, away from me. “Get on your knees and beg for my mercy.”

My knees bend at once, and I bow before him. “I crave your mercy, my lord. Forgive me.”

In my prostrate position, I can’t see his face, only the rug. I stay motionless, waiting for what comes next—a blow, a curse, a pronouncement of torture or mutilation, his cock forced in my mouth or my ass...

“You’ll join me at court,” he says, in a tone that makes my insides tighten, though I manage to suppress an actual shudder. “You’ll be there as my pet, muzzled and leashed. I have visitors coming today—friends who share my affinity for degrading pretty fools. You’ll serve them however they wish, and later

we'll retreat to my private parlor and use you until you bleed. Then tomorrow I will determine your punishment. Understand?"

"Yes, my lord," I say through clenched teeth.

"Speak louder. And call me 'master.'"

"Yes, master."

He stalks out of the room, and I hear him giving instructions to the servants outside. They enter a moment later and take me away to be prepared.

The preparation is humiliating, and it takes much longer than I expected. They use a special tonic and various cleansing implements to flush my body clean of all waste. They shave every bit of body hair, including my face, and then scrub my skin harshly before smearing me with a salve that's intended to soften and perfume the skin. After that, I'm dressed in a scanty outfit of leather, straps, buckles—and an embarrassingly prominent codpiece.

The final indignity is a leather muzzle, studded with tiny metal spikes. There's a hard strip of leather, like the bit of a horse's bridle, which they force between my jaws. Then they secure the cup of the muzzle over my mouth before binding the contraption tightly to my head with three narrow straps.

I'm allowed to walk through the palace halls until we reach the throne room, but the moment the King sees me, he commands, "Down on all fours like the dog you are, and crawl to your King."

I have no choice but to obey.

The King has a girl on his knee—maybe eighteen or nineteen years of age, clad in a gauzy pink dress. She's a lovely thing with big frightened eyes and a smile quivering on her mouth. Since all his concubines left, I suppose he's had to amuse himself somehow. Perhaps she's been his plaything while I recovered, and now it's my turn.

I'm still crawling on all fours with as much dignity as I can muster—which isn't much. I'm conscious that my ass cheeks are mostly exposed to all the nobles and petitioners in the throne room. Whispers travel among the onlookers as I crawl up the

steps to the throne and sit down on the top one, near the King's feet.

“See here, Berga,” the King croons, stroking the girl's arm. “See my new Half-Elf pet? Would you like to play with him?”

She glances nervously at me, then gives the King a questioning look.

“Touch his ears,” the King suggests.

The girl leans forward, and her small fingers fumble along the edge of my ear. She's trembling.

She's so different from my Juliette. Juliette weeps, panics, and trembles sometimes—she gets scared and anxious like anyone else, but beneath every natural reaction there is always a steadiness, a palpable strength. In the sweetness of her tears there is a rich confidence. She may collapse, but she always rises. She may be battered, but she's never beaten, not really—not inside, where it matters. She adapts, she plans. She finds a way.

The poor girl on the King's knee is already beaten. There's a hollow, fragile distance in her eyes, a helplessness in her touch that I'd pity if I were a better man. But at the moment I'm most concerned about where the King's depraved imagination will take us—how far he'll go to prove his control over me. What he'll make us do in front of the people in this room.

Lucky for me, one of the stewards approaches with a sheaf of papers and asks timidly, “We have a dispute about the bill of sale for the Laudarin Estate. It could not be resolved in the courts, so Lords Felzik and Krom are asking Your Majesty for the final say in the matter.”

“Oh, very well.” The King tugs at the crotch of his pants. “Bring them forward.”

The two lords talk for several minutes, each man trying to persuade the King to rule in his favor. The debate devolves into a full-on argument, in which they call each other some delightfully nasty names that I tuck away in my mind for future use.

“Enough!” calls the King at last, raising his hand. “I’ve made a decision. Since the true ownership of the Laudarin Estate is so hotly debated, the Crown will assume ownership. We will put the property up for sale, and either of you may purchase it if you have the funds. The proceeds will go to a worthy cause.”

A worthy cause... like funding the alliances with Darthage’s neighbors. Interesting. He annexed the property, ostensibly to resolve the argument, but he’s also looking for ways to raise the money necessary to replace the false gold he sent to his allies. Clever, cruel man.

The two lords are thoroughly dismayed by the King’s solution to their problem, and they express their displeasure so loudly they have to be escorted out of the throne room.

The King gives a few orders to the steward regarding the paperwork for the new estate, and then dumps the girl unceremoniously off his knee. He dismisses her with a gesture and she scurries away.

Leaning forward, the King seizes the leather leash attached to the collar around my neck. He could just command me to approach, but instead he jerks at the leash, nearly choking me. Grinding my teeth into the leather bit of the muzzle, I submit to his firm tug and move nearer to him.

“Sit here, between my legs,” he growls under his breath. “And think about what you’ve done.”

I can’t reply because of the muzzle, though several saucy retorts come to mind. Any of them would only make the situation worse, so perhaps it’s fortunate I can’t speak.

I should have told Juliette about the gold’s temporary status from the beginning. The transmutation was real—I did change the straw into actual, solid gold. But it was never going to last. The first time I performed the spell for her, I thought I’d be long gone before the gold reverted to straw. The second time, I persuaded myself that she didn’t need to know, because she and I were planning to destroy the King soon anyway. It was a harmless trick, one with no lasting consequences to either of us if things worked out right. I’m not sure why I assumed they

would go smoothly. It's not as if life has been particularly well-mannered toward me.

The King settles back on his throne, spreading his thighs and legs wide, and he pulls me backward until I'm sitting between his knees. He drives his fingers into my hair and yanks my head back, inspecting my muzzle for a second before shoving my head away and snapping his fingers at the steward, which I assume is the sign for another supplicant to approach.

For the next hour I sit between the King's knees. To keep my legs from falling asleep, I have to keep shifting my position on the uncomfortably hard marble of the dais. Now and then the King collars my throat with his hand, or fondles my ears, or gives me a vindictive kick when something reminds him of the disappearing gold.

At last the King calls for refreshments, and a buxom maid trots in, carrying a tray laden with mouthwatering fruit tarts, small sugared cookies, and fragile puff pastries overflowing with whipped cream.

At another snap of the King's fingers, a servant boy approaches, breaking off a morsel from each kind of dessert and tasting it. After a few minutes, he nods and steps back, and the maid climbs the steps to deliver the sweets to the King.

The maid pauses on the top step, her eyes slanting down to me. It's a cool, curious glance—pity with the faint heat of admiration.

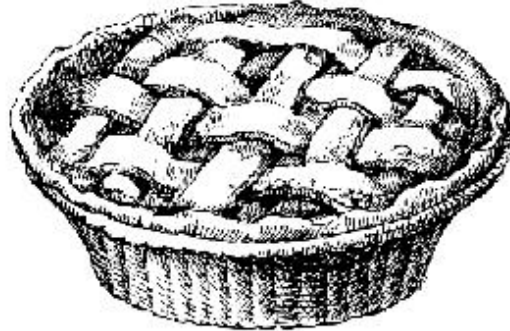
As she holds the tray out to the King, he barks, "On all fours, Half-Elf! You're going to be my table for a while."

I plant myself on palms and knees, keeping my spine straight and parallel to the floor while the maid sets the tray on my back.

As she moves, I catch a whiff of her scent—an earthly, floral richness, with a whisper of vanilla and the unmistakable fragrance of baked goods.

Her hair is blonder, and her face is all the wrong shape, but her scent doesn't lie.

I would know Juliette's fragrance anywhere.



JULIETTE

Rupert's eyes widen a fraction as I set the tray on his back.

He knows me. Somehow, despite the layers of Elven magic embedded into the plain silver bracelets I'm wearing, he knows who I am.

Don't react, I plead with him inwardly. *Stay calm, play along...*

All the King has to do is take a bite—preferably a few bites. There wasn't much of the shredded fennisley, and I had to grind it into powder and then divide it among three recipes. I'm not sure how concentrated it needs to be to kill the King. From what Rupert told me about the plant, it sounds fairly potent.

The King must eat, and I must wait until I'm sure the poison is taking effect. And then I have to speak Rupert's true name, before the King actually dies.

If I free Rupert now, and the King hasn't been poisoned, he'll have us both killed instantly. I need to wait until he shows signs of distress.

I need him dead.

King Falron is examining the treats, his thick bearded fingers hovering first over the cookies, then over the fruit tarts.

“I’m not sure I’m in the mood for something sweet,” he mutters.

Oh shit.

What if he sends me back to the kitchen with orders to bring him something savory instead? There’s no more of the fennisley to sprinkle on anything else.

I stand there, stomach churning and heart thundering. But I have to control my breath and keep it steady, or this will all be for nothing.

Just a little longer. Hold on, and hope. Think of everything you’ve done to get here.

The trip to the Sanctuary. The journey into the Riddenwold, the meeting with the Elves. The banquet, and the sleepless night that followed. I was exhausted the next day, yet restive, eager to get back to Giltos.

The trip would have taken me days. But when Lord Argelos brought me the charmed bracelets, he also brought me something else—a huge mirror that could transport one person anywhere they desired. After that single use, it would crack and never work again.

“It’s one of a set of five charmed mirrors I inherited,” said Lord Argelos. “My son took a pair of them when he left—palm-sized that could produce a lifelike illusion. This was too big for him to steal, I suppose.”

“You’re willing to let me use this?” I asked him, hardly daring to believe it.

“The boy needs you,” he replied simply. “The sooner the better.”

I couldn’t bring Bede through the mirror with me, but Enthel and Lannau swore they would take her back to Lensterhaven and care for her. We said a hasty, tearful goodbye.

“I’ll write to you,” I told her, “and you’ll write to me... the longest letters, everything you want to say.” And she nodded, one hand pressed to her heart like a wordless vow.

The mirror brought me to the Royal City yesterday morning, but it took hours to contact Mistress Moorne and arrange my entrance into the House of Bounty—then more hours to secure my role as a newly hired maid. Even with an impenetrable, magical disguise, certain protocols had to be followed, and the cook had to call in a few favors with her contacts throughout the palace. Once the arrangements were made and the plans were in place, we still had to create the poisoned food I've just delivered to the King.

After all that, he's still dithering over which treat to take, while Rupert remains on hands and knees, a living table for His Perverse Majesty.

Just fucking eat something. I'm two seconds away from shoving a cookie down the King's throat.

And then he snatches up one of the fruit tarts and sinks his teeth in.

He makes an obscene noise of appreciation through the mouthful of crust, while fruit filling oozes in scarlet globs from his partly closed mouth. He drops Rupert's leather leash and grabs a second tart from the tray, then waves it away.

I pick up the tray and retreat a little, moving one step down from the throne platform. My eyes swerve to Rupert's, shining blue over the silver-studded leather muzzle he's wearing.

They didn't need to muzzle him. It's not as though he can do any magic without the King's permission, anyway. No, this was an act of degradation, of humiliation. His tanned, tattooed body is on full display, crisscrossed with leather straps, and there's a prominent codpiece covering his dick. They've shaved him, too, including the dark scruff along his sharp jaw. He looks younger without it.

Is it wrong that, scared as I am for both of us, there's a part of me that likes him this way?

I'm sick. And I've been watching Rupert too long—the King has noticed. He shoves the rest of the second tart into his mouth and seizes Rupert's leash again, yanking it hard. Rupert chokes against the muzzle as his throat is sharply constricted.

But then the King coughs too. Sputters. It seems as if he's choking on his food. His eyes bulge and he strikes his own chest as if trying to dislodge an obstruction.

A guard steps cautiously forward. "Sire?"

Quickly I set the tray down, mount the top step, and lean forward, as if I'm checking on the King.

As I bend nearer to him, I say clearly and quietly the name I was given.

"Rumplestiltskin."

Rupert makes a muffled sound, like a half-sob of relief.

Capillaries are bursting across the King's eyeballs, painting the whites in spidery red. His skin is darkening, turning a bluish purple.

He's dying. The culmination of a long scheme concocted by his own servants.

"This is for the concubines," I whisper, as guards rush up the steps to the throne and someone shouts for a physician. "For the eunuchs. And for me."

Then I seize my tray and hurry back down the steps, like a simple maid scared off by the ruckus. Out of the corner of my eye I see Rupert retreating as well, now that his leash has fallen free of the King's slack hand.

Rupert moves out of the way as the guards crowd around the King, who is slumping lower in the throne, while a strange burbling sound issues from his mouth.

I pause just inside the door through which I came, peering at the scene of panic in the throne room.

An older servant bustles up beside me. "Hurry back to the kitchen with that, girl!"

She thinks I came from the palace kitchens. She has no idea that an hour ago I intercepted the palace maid who was originally supposed to deliver the King's food and bribed her to let me do it instead. Nor does she know that these treats actually came from the kitchens of the House of Bounty.

I don't want her getting suspicious or asking questions, but I can't leave this hallway just yet. I need to buy myself time until Rupert can get clear of the dais without drawing too much attention. He has to join me here, and then I have to lead him out of the palace along the prescribed route, while Mistress Moorne and her rebels make their move. The rebels are standing in the throne room right now, blending into the crowd—servants, guards, and even a few nobles, all waiting for the signal to act.

“Do you think His Majesty is alright?” I ask the older servant.

“Never mind that! Go on, off with you!” She propels me farther down the hallway.

There's another maid standing in the passage, holding a crystal cruet of amber liquid—probably a favorite liquor of the King's. She looks younger than me, so I balance the tray on one forearm, snatch the cruet, and shove the tray into her chest. She grabs it reflexively.

“Take this back to the kitchen,” I order. “The King doesn't like any of it, so you can give it to the other guards and servants.”

“I—well, alright.” She trots away obediently.

It's the same trick I used to dispose of the charmed cupcakes. Servants and guards will never say no to free food, especially not food prepared for a king. Thanks to the targeted nature of the poison, it won't hurt them, and all remaining evidence will be eliminated.

The pushy older servant moves out into the throne room, drawn by her own curiosity. From my current position a half-dozen paces down the hall, I have a partial view of the dais, but there are so many people clustered around it I can't be sure what's happening. The noise level of the court has definitely increased.

A tall, well-toned, half-naked figure darts into the hallway, and my heart nearly stops.

Rupert. Or Rahndek, or Akos, or Rumpelstiltskin...

Mine.

He's still muzzled, still dressed like a debauched slave. But his eyes burn blue, and he reaches for me, like he wants to pull me into his arms.

"We can't!" I whisper, casting a terrified glance up and down the hall. "Quick, quick! There's a place we're supposed to go, to wait until they can get us out of the palace safely. Come on."

He arches an eyebrow, but he can't very well protest. He's bonded to me now, after all.

He follows me as I dart down hallways, turn corners, and scurry down stairs. I have to consult the hastily-scrawled map in my pocket a few times, but finally I see it—a faded old tapestry depicting a dragon and a lamb slaying a knight. It's heavy, and when I pull it aside, dust leaves the coarse fabric in a gray puff.

I cough a little, waving my hand to clear the air. Rupert takes over holding the tapestry aside while I pull out the key Mistress Moorne gave me and unlock the small door behind the tapestry.

"In here."

Rupert hooks his eyebrow even more dramatically, and I roll my eyes.

"Get *in*," I tell him. "There's going to be a coup, and I made a deal for both of us to be out of the way while it happens, alright?"

With an expressive frown, he crawls through the low doorway. I follow him on hands and knees, pull the tapestry back into place, and shut the door.

The space we're in is pitch black, but from the feel of the air, we're in a larger space than one might expect, judging by the small size of the door. After a moment, I become conscious of a blue glow—Rupert's eyes, shining in the dark. They don't do much to illuminate the space, but it's better than nothing.

"We have to wait here," I tell Rupert. "You can't be involved in the coup, because of your people's law. And I'd be useless—I have no fighting skills. We're the two people who

were nearest the King at the moment of his death, so we'll be the prime suspects. It's best if we disappear for several hours while the rebels attempt their takeover. They'll send someone to fetch us later, and then sneak us out of the city."

Rupert makes a sound in his throat.

"Oh goddess—you're still muzzled. Can't you get the thing off?"

I reach toward him in the dark, toward where I think his head might be. My fingers encounter one pointed ear, then the softness of his hair, then a leather strap. I fumble with the fastenings of the muzzle. No wonder he can't take it off himself—these are more complex than regular buckles, and they're nearly impossible to undo without seeing them.

But I haven't come this far just to be stumped by a couple of fucking leather straps. Teeth clenched, I work on the buckles until I manage to unfasten them all.

"I give you one primary command, and one only," I breathe as the straps loosen. "You will be your own master in everything. You'll make your own choices and obey no future orders from me."

The muzzle's straps slip from my fingers as it falls away. There's a shifting sound in the dark—Rupert turning to face me as we sit there on the floor. The sound of his breath changes—it's nearer, heavier, and I can see his eyes again, glowing blue.

"I'll make my own choices," he says. "But most of those will align with yours anyway. I'm your slave, Juliette, and not by my name, or any compulsion except my love."

Love.

He loves me.

My throat is too tight to reply, so I reach for him. When my palms encounter the hot skin of his chest, a soft sob of relief escapes me at touching him again, solid and alive... and whole, as far as I can tell.

"Did the King—what did he do to you?" I manage.

"Kissed me. Roughed me up a bit. Worse things would have happened, but you returned just in time." His fingers

encircle my wrist, then his palm glides up my arm to my shoulder. “You came back for me.”

“Of course I fucking did.”

“How did you learn my name?”

“Your father.”

“No shit.” His voice is hollow with awe. “You went to the Sanctuary? How did you find it?”

“Enthel and Lannau, your friends from Lensterhaven. The ones who made your boots.”

“I’m surprised they helped you,” he says. “They can be unpredictable, those two, and cruel by human standards. I love them, but they’re dangerous in their dealings.”

Dangerous in their dealings—yes, I would say so. But I can’t tell him the price I paid. Not now, not amid such chaos. The loss of our firstborn is something we’ll discuss later.

“I got the name, and that’s all that matters,” I tell him. “Though I had to give up Axidor in exchange for the Elves’ goodwill.”

“Clever woman.” Surprise colors his tone. “You found it.”

“And the fennisley. Though why you’d hide two such things in an old notebook is beyond me.”

“Because no one would think to look there. And it was the one possession I intended to keep safe no matter what.”

“Why?”

“It’s you. Part of you, anyway.”

“That’s not much of an answer.”

He sighs. “I can’t really explain what that little book means to me, Juliette. Maybe someday, but not now, when all I want to do is kiss you.”

“Do it then,” I reply.

He rubs my arms up and down, casually pushing the lace of my maid’s uniform off my shoulders until they’re bare. Then his hands slide up my neck, his thumbs tracing my jaw.

“I’m grateful, Juliette.” His voice is hoarse, jagged.

“So am I. Grateful to you.” I sway toward him in the velvet darkness, until I can feel the heat of his skin through my dress, until the softness of me is pressed against the hard planes of his chest.

My arms wind around his body, pulling him tighter against me, and when I tip up my face, his lips find mine. The kiss is soft and hot, a slow flame licking between us, a glow broadening like dawn along the horizon.

Rupert flicks his tongue across mine, teasing me, and my body responds with an answering quiver of need between my legs. He’s pushing my dress farther off my shoulders, his fingers playing along the neckline, tracing the arches of my breasts.

“We can’t fuck,” I say breathlessly. “We’re just supposed to hide down here until they can smuggle us out. And besides—I’m on my monthly bleeding.”

“I don’t care.” He kisses me again, rough and sloppy this time, a demanding wet kiss that makes me liquid with desire.

“It would be so messy,” I whisper.

“I can craft a spell to clean up afterward.”

“You can do that? Why didn’t you do that when we fucked in the kitchen?”

“Didn’t want to waste the magic then. But right now, if it’s a question of fucking you or not, I’ll use every bit of magic in my body as long as I can come in that pussy of yours.” He’s breathing ragged and heavy, with an ache in his voice that’s beyond lust. “I’ve been thinking about you every minute of every day and night, sweetheart—it’s the only thing that kept me alive, kept me sane... and when I say I need you I mean it with every bone in my body. I *need* to be near you, in you.”

His voice cracks on the last two words, and the vulnerability nearly breaks my heart.

“Can you magic a little light?” I whisper.

He says something in the Elventongue, and a filmy golden illusion springs to life over our heads—a constellation of tiny yellow stars. It illuminates the space we’re in, which is about

the size of a small bedroom, unfurnished and bare except for a jug of water, a basket of provisions, and a couple blankets over in the corner.

In that glow I see my Half-Elf, his beautiful naked body crisscrossed with leather, sitting on the floor, watching me with those brilliant azure eyes.

“I won’t let you lick me during my bleeding,” I tell him. “Even if *you* don’t think that’s disgusting, I do, and it’s my choice. But if you really want to fuck me...” I pull down the bodice of my dress and lift my tits out so they’re on full display. “Come and show me how grateful you are.”



THE TRICKSTER

I capture the huge globes of her breasts with both hands, thumbing her nipples eagerly. Juliette leans back against the wall with a soft whimper while I gather her tits, bury my face between them, suck on those tight nipples one after another.

She can't seem to take her eyes off my body. My leather slave-garb appeals to her, even though she won't admit it.

"Would you like to be on a throne with me at your feet?" I whisper, kissing my way up her neck.

"I..." She's panting, her skin flushes in rosy patches over her breasts and throat.

"Would you like me as your pet? My strength, utterly at your mercy? My will subjugated to yours?"

"That's wrong," she gasps.

"Not if we both enjoy it and agree to it."

"Maybe," she relents, her voice barely above a breath.

"A game we can play together sometime," I assure her. "Lie on your stomach, sweetheart, and lift that magnificent ass for me."

On knees and forearms, she lifts her rear high, and I push her skirts up around her waist before gently pulling down her stockings and underwear. There's a wad of cloth with a crimson stain, and I take care not to dislodge it from the panties as I work the stockings and underwear further down her legs.

She's slick with scarlet, arousal and blood. A primal part of me appreciates this sign of her fertility, the knowledge that in a week or so, she'd be ripe for me to put a child in her belly.

That thought should terrify me. I've always sworn I'd never impregnate a human woman like my father did. I've never thought of myself as a decent enough person to be a father. And yet, with Juliette at my side... maybe I could be.

"Rupert," she says thickly. "How long are you going to stare at my pussy?"

"Just a moment longer, love." I fondle her bottom with both hands, delighting in its generous, dimpled curves. "You're fucking beautiful, you know."

"You said you need me," she chokes out. "But Rupert—I need *you*. I need you so badly I could cry."

"Cry then, sweetheart," I murmur, unlacing the codpiece that conceals my dick. "You know how much I love the fragrance of your tears, especially when they're scented with love and lust."

"Fucking *fuck* me already," she hisses, and I can't help chuckling at her impatience. But my laugh cracks a little, because I crave her desperately. My cock is so hard and swollen I can barely stand to touch it long enough to guide myself into her slit.

She's slippery, swollen, ready for me, and I groan at the rapturous sensation of gliding deep inside her body.

"*F-u-u-u-ck*," I whisper, drawing out the word.

"Do it hard," she whispers back, and I can feel the tremor of her desire, her urgency, as I grasp her hips and start thrusting.

She's crying. The scent of her tears perfumes the air, and I inhale while I fuck her, discerning every note of relief, of carnal

hunger, of anxiety, of passion... of affection, rich and deep and strong.

“You love me,” I say hoarsely, pumping my cock into her wetness.

“I do,” she pants. “I do, I do... oh, I’m going to come—faster, please, Rupert, please...”

And right then, buried to the hilt in her sweet cunt, I decide that Rupert is going to be my new name, permanently. I’ve made it mine by tricks and by trial, and she’s made it ours by letting it fall from her sweet lips, by half-shrieking it as she comes on my cock.

Her faint little shrieks continue—shrill gasps so sexy I can’t help coming to the sound of them. I shove myself into her hard, thrilling at the clench of her pussy around my dick. I could pass out from this bliss—it’s fucking divine.

Even after coming I stay there for a moment, safe inside her... both of us connected more deeply than we’ve ever been.

This wasn’t just quick sex in a secret room while the kingdom convulses amid the death-throes of the King.

This was the sealing of something between us—Juliette and me. The acknowledgement of our bond, the bloody, beautiful rite that confirms how far we’ll go for each other.

I run my hand up her back, into her hair. “I love you.”

She gives a soft, contented sigh. “I love you, too.”

When I leave her body, my cock is wet with blood and cum. I perform a quick spell to clean us both, but it leaves me shaky. It’s a good thing the cook and her rebel friends didn’t include my magic in the mix when calculating the allies they would have for their coup. It might take me months to recover fully from Lady Kessalif’s curse.

Juliette and I sit side by side on blankets in the secret room, and we talk. We talk for hours about everything. I tell her about my favorite tricks I’ve played and my worst memories of my father. She tells me about all the times her brother broke her heart, and about learning to bake with her mother. We eat and

drink from the provisions in the hiding place, and then we talk more.

Later she takes my cock out of the codpiece again and worships it with her tongue until I come helplessly in her mouth. And after that I slide my hand into her panties and massage her clit until she comes softly and sweetly against my hand. Afterward I lick her blood from my fingers to show her I don't mind it, and she yells at me for being disgusting, and I laugh while she pummels my shoulder and chest with her fists.

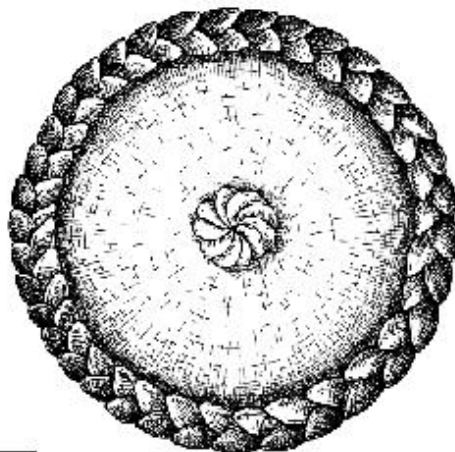
So we pass the time until we grow quiet and tired, until there's a scuffling sound at the door and it finally opens to reveal the face of a young servant.

"You're to come with me," he says. "Quick and quiet. There's still some fighting in the halls, but the tide has turned. Looks like we'll be having a democracy instead of a monarchy, after all!"

"Big words, lad," I tell him with a yawn.

"And a big difference for people like me," he says sharply, his eyes burning with all the vehemence and zeal of youth. "I'm proud to be a part of the change."

I open my mouth to tell him I was part of the change, too, but Juliette gives me a warning shake of her head. I hold my tongue, suspecting that she and Mistress Moorne have kept our part in the coup a secret, even from the other rebels. And as much as I'd like to claim a little credit for obtaining the fennisley, I have to admit it's better this way. Juliette and I have done what we planned to do—aided in the removal of a wicked ruler, and freed her and the other concubines from his clutches. It's time to disappear now. Time to find out how many of her dreams I can bring to life.



JULIETTE

Once we're safely escorted outside the city, we run.

There's no use waiting around to be arrested, or trying to resolve the conflict ourselves. I care about the kingdom, of course—I've broadened my understanding of the problems plaguing our nation, and I want to be part of the change—but for now, I've done enough by killing the King. I don't want to be held up as a revolutionary symbol or executed as a warning to lawless vigilantes. Neither of those fates sound appealing in the least.

So we run, Rupert and I, straight for the border to Messava. It's a sprawling confederation with its own issues, but it's friendly to small businesses, with lower taxes and reasonable regulations. Plus it's a beautiful country, so there are plenty of tourists and travelers, especially near the cities of Filliden and Vassela in the south.

We have nothing at first. Nothing but a few clothes, my notebook, and a coin-purse generously given to us by Mistress Moorne in gratitude for our help.

We find a town whose charm and cheap housing appeals to both of us. As soon as we're settled, I send letters back home, asking for news of my brother. The responses take weeks to arrive, and in the meantime I write to Shenya, receiving word that both she and Nerith are safe and happy. She tells me about the formation of the fledging democracy in Darthage, led by temporary President Moorne, former head cook in the House of Bounty.

It's encouraging news, but not the news I'm most desperate to hear. The replies from Maystead trickle in one by one, all of them claiming ignorance of Prain's whereabouts.

The last response is from Mistress Godward, written in her typical direct style.

Juliette,

You've always been straight with me, so I'll tell you what no one else will. Prain is dead. Dom Echelin's enforcers killed him the night you left. Not many know it for sure, though they suspect. But my husband saw it happen while he was making a delivery. Dom Echelin tried to take over your mill and your house, but your employees stepped up and fended him off. They got the Lady Mayor to intervene and protect your interests, so you've still got the old place, to do with as you please.

Heard some wild rumors about you and the goings on in the royal city. Not sure I believe them.

Keep baking. You always did make the best bread.

Heloise Godward

After reading the letter, I sit in perfect stillness and silence for a long time. Rupert doesn't touch me or speak to me—somehow he understands that I need space and quiet.

In those moments, I understand the Elves better than ever before. Some emotions, like my feelings about my brother, are simply too deep and too complex to express.

The next day, I send word back home to trusted friends who can handle the sale of the mill, the house, and the land on my behalf. I give orders for all my employees to receive a portion of the proceeds.

Rupert and I work and wait—him doing various odd jobs that are more or less honest, me as a server in the local pub.

After a couple months, we receive a trunk of my personal belongings, with the remainder of the profits from the mill secreted inside. It's the nest egg we need, the starter money for the dream we shared in the House of Bounty all those months ago.

“We'll find a location with gardens and stables, somewhere between two big cities, on a main travel route,” I tell Rupert one evening. We're sitting on the bench in the center of Hollen's Bridge, on the outskirts of the village where we've been staying. “Rooms upstairs, and a pub below. We'll keep the menu simple, and we'll provide the very best quality and a pleasant experience. I'll do the cooking, and we'll both deal with customers. You're charming—you just need a little practice having patience with the troublesome types. And I need to know more about which spells you can do, so I can figure out how to leverage your magic for the business.”

Rupert raises his eyebrows, and I wince.

“Alright, that sounded really cold and mercenary,” I admit. “What I mean is, you have certain gifts that you bring to this enterprise, and I—”

“Easy, sweetheart.” He wraps an arm around my shoulders and kisses the top of my head, laughing into my hair. “I know what you meant. You want to play to my strengths and make me your partner in this.”

“Exactly.” I take his hand, playing idly with his fingers. “I know the future I want to work for. But if at any time you decide you don't want that future, you can tell me. You're free to go anywhere, love anyone, and be anything that will bring you happiness.”

It's hard to form those words, but I have to. I must be sure he isn't staying because I saved him, or because of some lingering compulsion. He has to want this. And if he doesn't, I need to let him go.

“Juliette,” he says, in a low, velvety tone, and my stomach thrills. “Look at me.”

I turn and lift my face to his. His expression is uncharacteristically serious, and a fierce light gleams in his blue eyes.

“You are where I want to be, whom I want to love, and the ‘why’ of my entire existence. You have been from the moment I met you, though I didn’t realize it at first. Where you go, I will follow. I will cheer you on, work at your side, tease you out of your sadness, and fuck you senseless whenever you’ll let me. This—you and me—it works. And I want to be your partner, your plaything, and your friend until the day I die. Does that clarify things for you? Do I need to write it in the notebook? Make a list of goals? One: Convince Juliette that I really do love her. Two: Persuade her to call me ‘stallion’ while we’re fucking...”

He’s teasing now, grinning, and I poke him in the ribs. He barks out a laugh and grabs me, tickling me unmercifully.

“Three,” he says, while I squeal and thrash, “marry Juliette as soon as possible. Four: fuck Juliette at least three times a day. Five—”

“What?” I gasp, stilling in his grasp. “What did you say?”

“Oh, that.” He shrugs. “I’m going to marry you.”

“You are?” I raise my eyebrows. “Just like that?”

A mischievous smirk. “Just like that.”

“I suppose I have no say in the matter.”

“None at all.” He leans in, nuzzling his nose with mine before kissing me soundly.

“What’s five?” I ask, breathless, when he breaks the kiss.

“Five is putting a baby inside you,” he murmurs against my cheek. “If I haven’t already.”

“I’ve been taking a contraceptive tonic I got from the town apothecary,” I say, but my heart is sinking.

I haven’t told him yet, about the deal I made with Enthel and Lannau. At first everything was so chaotic, and then we had to run for our lives to a whole new country, and then I had to deal with the sale of the mill and our survival here in Abrella.

Rupert's smile is gone—he's looking into my face with such concern it breaks my heart. "What's wrong?"

"I have to tell you something, and it's going to hurt. I had to make a bargain with Lannau and Enthel so they would show me the way to the Sanctuary. You were right—they are dangerous in their dealings, and they can be cruel when their own happiness is at stake. It's only natural, I suppose, when you want something enough... After all, I was willing to do anything for your sake..."

"Spit it out, love," he says tightly. "You're scaring me."

"I made a deal with them, because I didn't want you to spend your life in slavery, being controlled and raped and tortured." My voice thickens with tears. "I couldn't leave you there, Rupert. I couldn't. And I had nothing to offer them, so I agreed to let them adopt our first baby."

His face goes utterly white.

"They'll be good to the child," I say quickly. "They want it so badly, and I know they'll be good mothers. It's not as if I can undo it now. It's done, and I wouldn't take it back if I could, because that bargain gave me the power to save you."

Rupert sucks in a sharp breath, as if he is only just now remembering his need for air.

His face is still tense, but his warm hands close over both of mine. "Thank you, sweetheart." He looks deep into my eyes. "I can only imagine how much that cost you."

"And you." My eyes fill with tears. "You're going to suffer the loss, too. I'm so sorry I had to do it. I wish I didn't have to cause you more pain, but it was the only way."

"Was there a condition to the bargain?" he asks. "Anything we can use?"

I shake my head. "Before I left the Sanctuary, Enthel told me they'll come to fetch the baby when it's three months old. I say we build our lives and begin our family with the understanding that the first baby is a gift to them—the price of your freedom. And I'm happy to pay it."

Rupert pulls me close. “Who knows? Maybe it won’t hurt much when we get to that point.”

“Maybe,” I say doubtfully.

“Let’s not think about it,” he suggests. “We do the Elvish thing—we sublimate that fear, that pain, because there’s no use torturing ourselves with something that isn’t reality yet. Until it happens, we’ll focus on what we can control. Like the inn.”

“The inn,” I say, brightening involuntarily. He smiles at me, my excitement reflected in his eyes.

As we sit beneath the pink-and-orange sunset, with the pretty village behind us and the stream rippling beneath the bridge, I take out my notebook and a pencil, and we continue planning our future.



JULIETTE

A FEW YEARS LATER

Three months isn't enough.

I lower my face to the soft, fuzzy head of the baby sleeping in my arms. I breathe deeply, inhaling her fragrance. She has the most delicate, wispy, brown hair, and the chubbiest cheeks, like small round apples, and the shiniest plump lips. Her lashes are sealed now, dark brown fringes against her cheeks, and her eyelids are tinged faintly purple at the edges. She stayed awake for several hours straight today, and she's exhausted.

At least she'll be sleeping when it happens.

The solid warmth of her small body in my arms gives me so much delight, and so much pain. I fought against holding her at first. Didn't want to get attached, only to lose her, but the midwife handed her to Rupert and when I saw the wonder on his face as he looked into her eyes for the first time, I couldn't resist. I wanted a turn.

He's standing by the window now, staring out into the night while I pace the room slowly, memorizing our daughter's

fragrance.

“Maybe they won’t come,” I murmur. “We haven’t heard from them in three years. Maybe they—”

“They’ll come,” he says sharply.

I bite my lip, stung at his tone.

He turns immediately, penitence in his blue eyes. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. It’s just—I can’t—I wish—”

“I know,” I whisper.

He walks over, moving in behind me. His hands close gently on my shoulders, and his lips brush my ear. “Do you regret it?”

“No, Rue.” My answer is the same as ever, truer now than when I made the bargain. I know him better now. We’ve had time to move beyond lust, past the first blush of new love into something deeper, stronger. “I will never regret sacrificing everything I had to free you. As much as it will flay our hearts to do this, we will do it, and we will heal, and we will move on. Together.”

He can’t answer me. I hear the tears in the thickness of his breath. This is hurting him more deeply than I expected.

“This might be worse than what I would have endured from the King,” he confesses in a raw whisper.

“I could break the bargain,” I reply quietly. “I’d pay the price with my life, but you could keep her.”

“No!” His fingers clamp around my upper arms. “Fuck no, Juliette.”

I let out a sigh that cracks in the middle. Relief and pain.

“They will take good care of her,” he says, low and broken. “They’re good women, kind women. Devoted to each other, as they will be to her. She’ll be loved so wonderfully and so well. We know this.”

“We know this,” I whisper back, nodding.

A sound outside the inn, somewhere on the dark road below our half-open window. Hoofbeats. Two horses, I think.

My stomach drops.

Rupert's grip tightens on my arms, and he buries his face in the curve of my neck. "Two more guests for the night," he murmurs against my skin.

We opened this inn a few months after I freed him, with money from the sale of the mill. We have our home above the kitchen, a modest apartment with a living area, two small bedrooms, and a bathroom. The inn has ten rooms and a pub downstairs, as well as a bakery counter where all my best baked goods are on display under glass domes. My pies are the talk of the countryside, and no fine dinner is complete with one of my cakes for dessert. Our inn is located between Filliden and Vassela, on a popular route for travelers. Thanks to Rupert's magic, which enhances the health of both our gardens and our stable of horses, the inn is fast becoming not merely an overnight stop, but a destination all its own.

I want to raise children here. But this child is the firstborn. She is marked for another life—a good life, but not one she'll share with us.

I don't know if Enthel and Lannau will ever tell her why I made this bargain. If they do, I hope she'll understand why I gave her up to save her father.

Whether she understands or not, I made the right choice.

The hoofbeats have stopped. A door closes somewhere down below. The baby stirs, and when I sway slowly to quiet her, Rupert sways too, sliding his hands along my arms to embrace us both.

I think I will remember this moment forever. Her plump little body, a heavy warmth in my arms. His big hands slipping over mine. The three of us, breathing lightly together. Waiting.

A tap at the door, and Rupert relinquishes me to open it.

Bede stands there, her face tight with concern. Shortly before we opened the inn, I invited her to come work with us, and she's been a valuable member of this place ever since. She manages the guests and supervises the other staff members, while I handle the food and Rupert cares for the gardens and

horses. Rupert and I may be the owners, but the place couldn't run without Bede, and we pay her accordingly.

It's not her job to announce visitors, but I appreciate her coming up herself, instead of waking one of the maids.

They're here, she signs.

"We'll come down in a moment," Rupert says.

With a nod and a sympathetic glance at me, she leaves.

He comes to my side and leans down to place a tender kiss on our baby daughter's forehead. "Three months after a child of Elf-blood is born, they are given their true name," he whispers. "I think Enthel and Lannau plan to do it, but the right is ours. Yours and mine. Do you agree?"

I nod, blinking back tears. "Yes, I do."

"Then I give you the name I have chosen for you," he whispers to our daughter. "You are one quarter Elf, so the name cannot control you, but it will be a tether between you and the one to whom you give it. May you choose wisely the object of your trust, Valynara."

The moment he speaks it, the name fits her. It *is* her. I can't explain it.

Rupert looks up at me. "We must not speak it again, but it will remain with her forever."

I nod, trying to hold in my tears, but it's not working—it's making everything worse. My breath is speeding up, my heart rate soaring to dangerous heights—

"Juliette. Breathe. Slowly now, love. With me."

I'm gasping, each breath a raw sob. I sink to the floor, clutching my baby, and Rupert kneels beside me, holding me together.

"Easy, sweetheart," he chokes out. "Breathe. You can do this."

"I can do this," I rasp. "I can do this."

It takes several long minutes and many words of encouragement from my sweet husband, but at last I'm able to

calm my pulse and breathe again. He helps me up, and together we descend the stairs.

With each step, I tell myself to breathe. To relax. To sublimate my feelings. *The more stoic the visage, the deeper the feeling goes.*

Enthel and Lannau are standing in the common room. They don't seem to have aged at all, and both are dressed in sumptuous gowns. They must have done great business in the three years since we last saw them.

I have to do this before I collapse again. *Don't think—just do it.*

Stiffly I walk over to Enthel and place my baby in her arms.

"I give my firstborn to you, Enthel and Lannau, to raise as your own," I tell them. "Our bargain is fulfilled before the goddess."

"And we accept the fulfillment of the deal," says Enthel quietly. "And as you have given her to us, so we return her to you, with all our best wishes for her happiness and yours."

She steps forward, holding the baby out.

Offering her back to me.

I accept the baby mechanically, dazedly, looking helplessly at Rupert for answers—but he seems just as stunned as I am.

"It was cruel to put you through this, but it had to be done," says Enthel. "You had to give her up to fulfill the bargain, and we couldn't release you from it. But now that it's fulfilled, we're free to give her back, and no one has to die."

"But—but you wanted a child," I exclaim.

"We did, yes!" says Lannau. "And we have one!"

The women move aside, and behind their voluminous skirts I see a tiny, pale girl with a mop of yellow hair.

"This is Cynda," says Lannau. "The three of us are moving to Qedron. Turns out we prefer a land with a monarchy rather than the democratic chaos in Darthage."

“That’s not the reason,” says Enthel, with an affectionate roll of her eyes.

“Well, it’s one of *my* reasons,” Lannau says stoutly. “So there you have it—the bargain is complete, you have your daughter, and we have ours.”

“But... she’s not half-Elven,” I manage. “You said—”

“I remember what we said,” Lannau cuts in. “But it turns out, her race wasn’t important. Not at all. We found her, or she found us, and she simply—*fits*. We knew at once that she was ours.”

“You didn’t steal her though,” Rupert says, finding his voice and speaking the question I’ve been scared to ask.

“Of course not!” Lannau bristles. “She ran away from the orphans’ home in Feverlake. When we brought her back, they told us her story, and we decided we needed each other. Wonderful, isn’t it?”

“Yes...” I stammer, turning to Rupert with pleading eyes. He takes the baby at once, and I stumble over to a chair to sit down. “It’s wonderful.”

“We’ll need a room for the night,” Lannau continues. “And then we’ll be on our way tomorrow.”

Bede drifts forward from the shadows, signing to me.

“Bede can show you ladies to a room,” I say, inwardly blessing Bede for her help. “We can have breakfast together tomorrow, before your journey. I’ll be up early anyway.”

“That sounds delightful. Come along, Cynda.” Enthel takes the child’s hand, and the three of them follow Bede up the stairs.

Rupert and I stare at each other for several long seconds.

And then a grin illuminates his face, bright as sunshine on fields of golden hay.

As the full realization of what just happened breaks over me, I smile too. “Rupert,” I gasp.

“I know,” he says, laughing. “I know.” He looks down at our baby and says enthusiastically, “Fuck yes!”

I burst into ecstatic giggles. “You’re going to have to watch your language around her.”

“She’s asleep.” He winks. “Didn’t hear a thing.”

“I suppose... I suppose we should put her to bed?” It feels strange to suggest our normal routine, when minutes ago I was convinced my baby’s cradle would be empty tonight.

“That’s exactly what we should do,” Rupert says.

We lay our firstborn in her cozy cradle—the one we bought for her, in the room we prepared even though we knew she would have to leave us. I suppose both of us hoped there would be a way out of this deal—another loophole.

But this time, we didn’t find the loophole... it was given to us.

With our daughter sleeping soundly, Rupert and I close the door and stand facing each other in our adjoining room. His heightened sense of hearing is more useful than ever with a baby in the house—he’ll know if she starts to cry.

The shocked stupid of my mind is still wearing off, and the joy is growing stronger, wilder. I could never express in words the sheer relief of being free of the bargain—it’s like a mountain has been shoved off my shoulders, and I’m finally standing upright and free again.

I hold Rupert’s gaze—brilliant blue and shining with the same hectic joy I feel.

I’m not sure who moves first. But somehow we decided on the same method of celebrating this moment—the only thing that can purge this much fear, joy, and relief from our bodies and leave us more connected than ever.

We collide, bodies pressing urgently together, tongues tangling, hands twisting into fabric.

We’ve learned to take advantage of every bit of peace and privacy we can get, so we’ve become experts at shedding clothes. We’re naked in seconds, and Rupert spreads me on the bed to worship my body with his mouth—every new curve, every stretch mark, and the breasts that have become far more generously proportioned since my pregnancy. I’m breastfeeding,

so things tend to get messier now, what with my tits leaking whenever I'm aroused, but Rupert doesn't care... he just tosses me a towel and continues eating me out with as much zest as the first time he tasted me.

He has discovered that if he uses his vibrating tongue right away, it's over too quickly, so he always makes me wait for it. Tonight, my mind is still adjusting to the abrupt reversal from tragedy and loss to relief and joy, so my body is equally confused. I want to come, but my brain just won't let me.

Rupert's face is deep in my pussy—he truly loves the flavor of me, and the scent of my arousal has a stronger effect on him than it would on a normal man. And I love the way his tongue feels... but I'm growing impatient.

“Rupert,” I hiss. “Do it now.”

He plants a soft kiss on my clit, and I shudder with need. “Patience, Juliette.”

“No. No patience. Pleasure, *now*. I fucking deserve it, Rupert, after tonight.”

“Fair enough. Spread those thighs a little wider for me, sweetheart.”

I open for him as wide as I can, and he pulls back my folds, baring my sensitive clit.

I'm rigid with expectation, barely breathing, feeling the cool air of the room stirring over my exposed pussy.

The very tip of his tongue touches my clit—a spark to the flame, and my body roars to life, explodes into climax. He knows the exact spot to apply that delicate vibration—the exact frequency I need.

“Oh,” I gasp. “Oh, fuck... Rupert, fuck—”

He knows I'm not done. The second orgasm takes a different technique—he massages my pussy and clit with his fingers for a moment before applying his buzzing tongue again, at a different angle.

“Shit!” I buck against his mouth, and he laughs, gripping my hips to steady me as I come again.

“That’s two.” He licks along my inner thigh, laps through my slit, then plunges his tongue inside, increasing the force of the vibration.

I come hard for the third time, my body tingling all over, breathless whimpers escaping my lips. Rupert growls his delight against my sex, caressing every trembling, pulsing bit of my pussy with his tongue. Then he rises on his knees, takes his cock in hand, and slips inside me.

I moan faintly at the slick, sweet rush of his entrance, at the solid, comforting fullness of him.

“This is so good,” I murmur. “Everything with you is so good.”

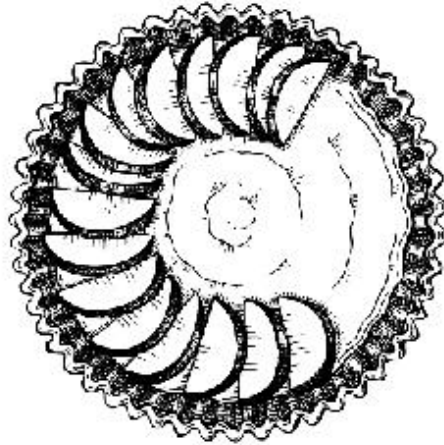
He braces himself over me, his blue eyes shining in the low light of our bedroom. There’s a cocky smirk hovering over his mouth, but his eyes are tender. “I knew it would be good with you, from the moment I tasted your muffin.”

“Pervert,” I whisper.

“Goddess.” He nuzzles into my hair, then kisses my cheek before meeting my lips with his. He pumps slowly at first, shifting gradually into a faster rhythm. His dick doesn’t vibrate, but he knows every bit of me inside and out now—he knows exactly how to angle himself to score that final, thigh-shaking orgasm. He’s working toward it now, his lower lip pinned between his teeth and his blue eyes fixed on my face with a hungry adoration that thrills me to my core.

I always wanted a husband and a family, alongside my business and baking. But I never realized how beautiful it would be to have someone who knows me so intimately, so thoroughly, and takes such pride and pleasure in making me come for him. He likes to surprise me in dark corners and closets and take me quickly against the wall. Sometimes he bends me over counters when we’re alone, or corners me in the barn to fuck me against the door of a stall. There’s familiarity with him, but there are surprises too, and that’s the best part about us. Comfort and security, yes—but adventure, too.

The wonder of the unexpected.



THE TRICKSTER

She's close. Her lovely face is flushed, her lids heavy, her lips swollen and parted. She blinks, dark lashes curtaining those beautiful eyes for a moment. Then she looks up at me, and my heart clenches for the ferocity of my love for her.

She's so wet for me. As I thrust into her, I feel the strength of her body, the slick of her passion, the tightening of every muscle as she shudders on the edge of orgasm. She feels so good I never want to stop fucking her, and yet I want that pinnacle, that climax, for both of us.

When I glance down at her breasts, half-covered by the towel, it's over. They're huge, gorgeous, moving so temptingly with every thrust—the sight of them finishes me and I groan, tensing and spilling my cum inside Juliette. But I manage to deliver two more firm thrusts, just enough to tip her into the chasm of her own pleasure. She gives the cutest little yelp when she comes this time. The fourth one is always her last, and the least intense, but it's what she needs to be fully sated. And one of my life goals is to thoroughly satisfy my gorgeous wife as often as I can.

She would say that's not a real life goal. I beg to differ.

I rock my hips against her, enjoying the last tremors of her orgasm. Still inside her, I lean down and kiss her mouth while she's breathless and panting. I love her in all ways, but especially like this—dazed and undone.

“You're the best thing that ever happened to me, Juliette Wetheris,” I whisper, with a light kiss to her forehead.

She reaches up, lays her hand on my cheek. “Same to you.”

Our wedding night was one year ago... the night our daughter was conceived. On that day, Juliette wore a silk dress and a pair of heeled shoes with pink ribbons—my gift to her. And when I took her family name as mine, my father was there, standing among the few guests who witnessed the occasion. He didn't stay the night, but after the ceremony he gave Juliette a beautiful golden hand mirror. “I have the mate of this set,” he told her. “With these mirrors, we'll be able to speak to each other now and then.”

I couldn't help laughing, stunned by the realization that my father approves of my wife... likes her better than me, perhaps.

We thanked him, and he nodded coolly before taking his leave of us.

We haven't told him about the baby, but now that we get to be a family, we can contact him and let him see her. I think he'll be happy for us. Not that we'll be able to tell.

Thank the goddess I broke free of that way of life.

Just for the hell of it, I kiss Juliette's mouth again. “We only have a few guests, and they're all asleep. What if you and I go down to the kitchen for a midnight snack?”

Her face lights up. “Oh yes! But... the baby...”

“You know I can hear her if she wakes. Come on, love. A celebratory midnight feast? A bottle of wine?”

She's already pushing me off her, sitting up, reaching for her clothes.

I chuckle. “Good to know where I stand. You're done with my tongue and my cock, so you have no further use for me, eh?”

“Oh, I have use for you.” She gives me a saucy little smile. “You’re good for opening wine bottles, carving up chickens, training horses—that sort of thing.”

“And making babies.”

Her eyes soften. “Yes, and making babies. We made such a beautiful one, Rue. I’m so glad we get to keep her.”

After gathering everything we need from the kitchen, we return to the room with a tray of snacks and wine. And before our celebratory feast begins, we peek into the room to admire our daughter—the tiny, delicate, adorable creature that expanded my heart to twice its size the moment I held her in my arms.

There is a magic in love, far greater than the spell I used to turn straw into gold. And it shimmers in the air tonight, a fragrance sweeter than any I have ever known.



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